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THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN

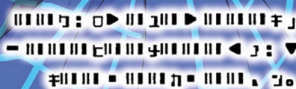
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THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN



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18

**THE BLACK DUAL
SWORDSMAN**

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**



"I suppose we should get started, too, then, Graph?"

GRAPHITE EDGE

One of the Four Elements and an executive of the former Nega Nebulus. His objective and true identity is, as always, shrouded in mystery.

"Anytime
you're
ready,
Lota."

KUROYUKIHIME

Legion Master of the new Nega Nebulus. Vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council.
Duel avatar: Black Lotus.

"I'm all right!!
...Superluminal Stroke!!"

UTAI SHINOMIYA

Member of the new Nega Nebulus.
One of the Four Elements.
Duel avatar: Ardor Maiden.





"Just today,
we could both
order the same
thing, right?"

"That's
how it is,
though.
I mean,
Burst
Linkers."

KOTO TAKANOUCHI

Close aide to Blue Knight, the
Leonids' Legion Master.
Duel avatar: Cobalt Blade.

YUKI TAKANOUCHI

Close aide to Blue Knight,
the Leonids' Legion Master.
Duel avatar: Manganese Blade.

"Th-that's
not the
issue!"

SHIHOKO NAGO

Master of the small Legion Petit Paquet,
which is made up of three close friends.
Working with Silver Crow, she was able
to free Yume and Satomi from the ISS kits.
Duel avatar: Chocolate Puppeteer.

"If you
met in
person,
that bird
boy
would
be
knocked
out in a
single
blow!"

"Well
anyway,
yeah.
I think
you're
cute, too,
Shiho."

YUME YURUKI

Member of the small
Legion Petit Paquet.
Duel avatar: Plum Flipper.

SATOMI MITO

Member of the small
Legion Petit Paquet.
Duel avatar: Mint Mitten.



You must go,
Crow!!

FUKO KURASAKI

Member of the new Nega
Nebulus. Master who taught
Haruyuki about Incarnate.
Duel avatar: Sky Raker.

"I'll
count
down.
Five,
four,
three,
two,
one...
zero!!"

HARUYUKI

Boy in the lowest school
caste. Member of the
new Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.



"Pard, I'm looking forward to
the labyrinth next week."

"K."

NIKO

Red King, Prominence Legion
Master. Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.

BLOOD LEOPARD

Deputy of Prominence.
One vertex of the Triplex.
Real name: Mihaya Kakei.

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THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



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ON
NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 18
REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen
Cover art by HIMA

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

■ **Normal Duel Field** = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.

■ **Movement Control System** = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.

■ **Image Control System** = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.

■ **Armor of Catastrophe** = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.

■ **Star Caster** = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.

■ **ISS kit** = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World. They are the greatsword *Impulse*, the staff *Tempest*, the large shield *Strife*, the Luminary (form unknown), the straight sword *Infinity*, the full-body armor *Destiny*, and the *Fluctuating Light* (form unknown).

■ **Mental-Scar Shell** = The emotional scars that are the foundation of a duel avatar (mental scars created from trauma in early childhood)—this is the shell enveloping them. Children with exceptionally hard and thick “shells” are said to produce metal-color duel avatars.

■ **Artificial metal color** = Refers to a metal-color avatar that is not generated naturally from the subject's mental scars, but rather produced artificially by a third party through the thickening of the Mental-Scar Shell.

■ **Unlimited EK** = Abbreviation for Unlimited Enemy Kill. The subject avatar is killed by a powerful Enemy in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and each time they regenerate (after a fixed period of time), they are killed again by that Enemy, falling into an infinite hell.

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A jet-black star falling from the bloodred sky:

The duel avatar plunged straight down from the roof of Shibuya Ravine Tower, a magnificent 230 meters aboveground.

Cloaked in a super-dense aura, the slender silhouette seemed many times larger than it actually was. Haruyuki found himself thinking that this overwhelming presence was on par even with that of the indomitable Green King and his cross-shaped great shield Strife, one of the Seven Arcs.

If the avatar crashed into the ground like this from that height, he would be killed instantly. The other duelists near the epicenter would also be unable to escape the impact unscathed.

But the starters for this duel/meeting were Iron Pound, the third seat of the Six Armors—the Green Legion’s executive branch—and Viridian Decurion, likewise Great Wall’s second seat. Which meant that the black avatar plummeting toward them had to be a member of the Gallery, like Haruyuki and his comrades, so he couldn’t die no matter what height he fell from, and no harm would come to the surrounding avatars.

Nevertheless, the thirteen people gathered in the Twilight stage cried out in surprise together—although Haruyuki actually screamed—and leapt back from the impact zone. The only ones who did not so much as flinch were Green Grandé and the Black King, Black Lotus.

Bearing two longswords crossed on his back and overcoat armor spread out, the black avatar continued his dramatic descent, arms tightly crossed in front of his chest, face mask raised triumphantly. He shot toward the marble floor of the Ravine Square rooftop plaza, and just when it seemed he would plunge into it face-first, the avatar abruptly spun around to face forward. Like an acrobat, he flipped forward at dizzying speed, arms still crossed, and in the last moment, he thrust his hands out and bent his knees.

Boom! The sound effect was rather intense for the fall of a Gallery member.

Once the dust settled, Haruyuki saw that the black dual swordsman avatar had managed a perfect landing a mere two meters

in front of Black Lotus.

Actually...although the avatar's timing and physical control were impeccable, Haruyuki wasn't entirely sure that his touchdown had been perfect. Because the dual swordsman had landed not on his feet, but rather with hands and knees on the ground, head bowed deeply. There was only one way to describe it—he was prostrate. He had landed in an apologetic bowing position from a height of 230 meters after fifteen somersaults.

“Sorry, Lota!” the avatar cried, his voice strong and resolute, his forehead practically scraping the floor.

“.....”

Each of them gathered there was speechless for their own individual reasons.

Haruyuki—and probably Takumu and Chiyuri—was simply baffled at the incomprehensible development, but Fuko, Akira, and the other Nega Nebulus veterans slumped their shoulders, while Pound and the Great Wall executive shook their heads in exasperation.

The Black King moved her shoulders up and down several times as if struggling with her choice of words before speaking, her voice just slightly chilled. “How many times have I told you to stop calling me ‘Lota’...Graph.”

Graph. This was apparently the name of the swordsman. Haruyuki felt like he'd heard it somewhere before, and after quick rumination, he finally remembered where. Akira, Fuko, Utai, and Kuroyukihime had all mentioned it any number of times. A nickname taken from the first part of the avatar's full name: Graphite Edge. The final member of the Nega Nebulus executive Four Elements.

“Wh-wh-what...?” Haruyuki gasped, taking a half step back.

Like Akira and Utai, Graphite Edge had fallen into an Unlimited Enemy Kill at the north gate, which was guarded by the God Genbu, in the mission to attack the Castle three years earlier, and he was supposedly still sealed away there. While it was impossible to dive regularly into the Unlimited Neutral Field once you were stuck in Unlimited EK, you were, however, free to come and go in normal duel fields, including this meeting space. That said, Haruyuki had thought the whereabouts of Graphite Edge were unknown—so what was he doing here?

The endless questions began clamoring for space in his mind. As he stood there, consumed by confusion and shock, Utai slid over to him.

“C, it seems you understand who this is, yes?”

“Y-yes. It's the Element Graphite Edge...right? But why...?” He tried to express any one of the vortex of questions coalescing in his brain, but Utai got the jump on him and shook her head briskly.

“If you are surprised or panicked each and every time Graph does something, there’ll be no end to it. The trick is to simply think of *him* as *that* sort of person and accept it.”

“R-right...”

This should have been an emotional reunion with an old comrade for Utai, but Haruyuki didn’t get the slightest hint of that in her *him* and *that*, causing further gaping from him. Opposite Utai, Fuko and Akira also bobbed their heads.

Kuroyukihime was similarly not unperturbed. She heaved an enormous sigh before addressing the still-prostrate avatar once more. “And what exactly are you sorry for? You grovel before me and apologize at our first meeting in three years, and I’m supposed to know why?”

“Nah.” The double swordsman lifted his head slightly. “Well, aah, what can I say? Truth is, I’m sorta staying somewhere other than Negabu right now.”

“Oh?”

“And I kinda got this title.”

“Oh?”

“So basically, okay, well...Ah...” This half-baked meandering finally evoked anger not in the black camp, but in the green’s Viridian Decurion.

“Would you behave yourself and stop with that embarrassing posture already?!” the gladiator in the deep-green armor and helmet yelled, stomping on the ground. “Whatever the circumstances, you are here as our representative! Stand tall, chest out, and name yourself!”

...*Our representative? What exactly does that mean?* Haruyuki cocked his head once more.

“I see,” Takumu, beside him, murmured hoarsely. “Is that it, then?”

Is that what, then? But Haruyuki didn’t need to ask.

Graph hung his head in resignation after this public scolding and did a sudden handstand from his prostrate position on the way to flipping his body back to standing.

Although they were both black, while Black Lotus’s semitransparent armor glittered like smoky quartz, Haruyuki noticed that Graphite Edge had semimatte armor with a soft texture as he turned the masculine design of his face mask toward the seven members of the black camp and introduced himself.

“Kay, I’ve never met some o’ you, so I guess I’ll do the intro thing. I’m Graphite Edge. Used to be one of Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements... and now, I’m what ya call the first seat of Great Wall’s Six Armors. Lota, Rekka, Careent, Denden, been a while. You three new faces, nice to meetcha.”

Utai groaned slightly at the casual greeting—most likely because he had called her the cutesy nickname Denden, but Haruyuki didn't have enough parking spots in his mental garage for that sort of thing right now.

The first seat of the Six Armors. So then, that meant he was above Viridian, the number-two spot in the Green Legion.

It wasn't just the members of Nega Nebulus who were surprised. Everyone other than Grandé and Decurion on the Great Wall side all reeled in unison and cried out.

"The first seat is...ex-Negabu?!" from Iron Pound.

"The...Anomaly...", whispered Lignum Vitae.

"You beat Veri and got a draw with the boss?!" Suntan Chafer gasped.

"I'm gonna kick that guy in the nuts!!" shouted Ash Roller.

Haruyuki finally remembered what Pound had said a few minutes earlier, that only the Green King and Decurion had ever met the first seat. The other Legion members didn't even know his name, much less what he looked like.

"Anomaly, huh?" Graphite Edge did a one-eighty to face the members of Great Wall and scratched the side of his helmet. "Haven't heard that name in a while. I guess none o'ya but G and Veri knew 'bout me, but—well anyway. I'm Graphite Edge. I've been the first seat for two years and eleven months now. Nice to meetcha."

Pound and the others were frozen, seemingly at a loss for how to respond to the sudden appearance of the Legion's number two, but finally, they managed brief greetings.

"...Hey."

"Sup."

Haruyuki watched over this, growing increasingly baffled, as Utai murmured from beside him, "Two years...and eleven months..."

He immediately flipped back through the calendar pages in his mind. It was July 2047 now, so two years and eleven months ago would have been August 2044. The month in which Kuroyukihime took the head of the first Red King, Red Rider. And in which the first Nega Nebulus was destroyed due to the colossal failure of their Castle attack.

In other words, Graphite Edge had transferred to Great Wall right after the annihilation of the Legion. That switchover was way too fast.

"So." The black swordsman shrugged lightly, as though he didn't feel the least bit of pressure from the eyes of some dozen people focused solely on him. "Jumpin' in like this, I'm eating up our time. Twenty minutes left? We gotta get moving, or this'll go nowhere...So, like, it's up to you, Lota."

"...If you're just going to dump everything in my hands, then why

did you even come...?” Kuroyukihime no doubt had many, many other things she wanted to say to him, but she pushed them back with a brief sigh and took a step forward. “But, well, it’s true that we don’t have time for that. A surprising face has joined you, Great Wall, but both sides do now have seven members, so let’s begin.”

She walked over to one of the two benches facing each other in the center of the plaza. Green Grandé also moved silently, cross-shaped shield on his back, and the two kings sat down firmly in the middle of their respective benches. Fuko, Utai, and Akira sat down to the right of Kuroyukihime, so Haruyuki hurriedly set himself down to her left. This put him directly across from Graphite Edge, and Haruyuki quickly lowered his face.

The only male Burst Linker in Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements. A warrior so powerful, he had managed a draw in a one-on-one fight with the Green King and even challenged the Sun God Inti, a Legend-class Enemy feared by all. He was a genuine high ranker, his color name “graphite” infinitesimally close to pure black.

Unable to understand how to process his arrival, Haruyuki snuck a glance at the dual swordsman. Graph’s sharp goggles hid his eye lenses, just like Silver Crow’s mirrored goggles hid his own, and he could get no sense of the avatar’s inner workings.

Friend? Foe? Was he planning something? Or not?

If he called Metatron and got her to “look” at Graph, he could learn all kinds of things, but if the Great Wall side took notice of the icon and demanded an explanation, they could use up all the remaining time talking about her and still not be done with the conversation. All that Haruyuki could do at the moment was watch and take careful notes on his own.

Once everyone had found a seat on the benches, Kuroyukihime began to speak again.

“First, I would like to express my gratitude once more to all of you in Great Wall for accepting our request. I started to say this before, as well, but our purpose today is to discuss measures for the Acceleration Research Society. At the meeting of the Seven Kings last week, the destruction of the ISS kit main body and the inactivation of all the kit terminals were confirmed, but we do not believe this is the end of the Society’s activity. They will no doubt use the negative Incarnate energy transferred from the kit main body to bring about destruction and chaos in the Accelerated World on an even greater scale. I wish to prevent that before it happens.”

Her words held a quiet yet resolute will, and not only the black side, but the green as well—excluding Graph and Grandé—sat up straighter.

Iron Pound raised the iron glove of his right hand. “That there’s

exactly why we were waiting for months on end for the chance to knock that damned Metatron out of the sky. To get rid of the Midtown Tower guard, so we could destroy the ISS kit main body inside.”

I'm so glad I didn't summon Metatron! Haruyuki threw up a silent prayer of gratitude.

“If those Society jerks are planning some big thing,” Pound continued, “we won’t hesitate to crush it. But, Black King, seems like you sussed out the deets of what they’re gonna do next. How? And why’re you coming to us with this instead of the Red Legion Promi? They’re Negabu allies.”

These were only natural questions. At the last meeting of the Seven Kings, Haruyuki and his comrades had reported basically none of the things they’d seen and done at the Acceleration Research Society headquarters. The only thing they’d been able to disclose to the other kings was that an enormous amount of Incarnate energy had been transferred from the kit main body. They’d been forced to keep secret the fact that the vessel that accepted that energy was Wolfram Cerberus, the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, produced from the Red King’s stolen Enhanced Armament, as well as the specific location of the headquarters themselves.

If it became public knowledge that the Red King was missing one part of Invincible, they ran the risk of the Yellow King getting up to no good again. And revealing the location of the headquarters was the same as announcing that one of the Seven Kings’ Legions was a front for the Society without any proof at all.

That situation had not changed since the meeting of the Seven Kings. Haruyuki held his breath and wondered how on earth Kuroyukihime would respond.

“Fisty— No, Pound,” Fuko began, “the answer to your question is simple. But unfortunately, there is no proof that this answer is correct outside of our experience and your faith in us. In other words, if you hear it, you will have to make a choice. Will you believe us and work with us on all fronts? Or will you not and cut off all ties?”

“...Those are pretty extreme choices,” Decurion said in a low voice from where he sat beside the Green King. “There’s not an option for partial trust and cooperation with limits?”

“There is not,” Fuko replied immediately. “And when you hear what we have to say, you’ll understand why.”

“.....”

Decurion fell silent and narrowed his eyes, while Pound crossed his arms, as if also deep in thought. The Legion’s number two and the first seat of the Six Armors, Graph, didn’t so much as twitch, and Lignum and Suntan remained quiet.

When the time remaining displayed in the upper part of his field

of view was down to nine hundred seconds, Haruyuki heard a *kawhunk!*

Ash Roller, at the end of the bench, had dropped the heel of his sturdy riding boot down on the marble tile. “This is getting seriously giga-annoying, yo. We’re all here *now*. If Negabu says squat, we’ll never get started. If GW don’t listen, we’ll all just get bone-broke tired, yeah? Being all undecided like this’s a waste of time.”

“And I’m *extra*-annoyed that ‘waste of time’ was the only part of what you just said that could be considered human speech, Ash,” Fuko remarked coolly, and the fin de siècle rider slid both his feet together and snapped up straight in his seat.

Grinning wryly, Decurion shot a glance at his Legion Master and nodded as though reading something in the profile of the ever-silent Green King. “Fine. I don’t know what kind of bomb it is, but it’s true that this will go nowhere unless we hear it. Much ado about nothing... So what’s this ‘answer’?”

“I’ll tell you, then,” Kuroyukihime responded, almost inaudibly, turning her gaze in the direction of the twilight sky over Minato Ward. “We already determined the destination of the Incarnate energy transferred from the top floor of Midtown Tower.”

“Then why didn’t you report that at the meeting of the Seven Kings?!” Iron Pound demanded, and the Black King didn’t immediately respond.

Instead, she brought her gaze back down to glance at her left—at Haruyuki and his comrades. “This is not from my own personal experience, but rather that of Silver Crow, Cyan Pile, and Lime Bell. They went after the members of the Acceleration Research Society who fled Midtown Tower and succeeded in penetrating their headquarters. At essentially the same time, myself, Sky Raker, Aqua Current, and Ardor Maiden destroyed the ISS kit main body and witnessed the transfer of the Incarnate energy. This energy poured down in the very spot where Crow and the others were fighting... There, it corrupted an existing Enhanced Armament and produced a most evil monster.”

“A monster?” Suntan Chafer parroted.

Kuroyukihime nodded. “What name should I give that monster...? Please tell us again, Silver Crow.”

“R-right.” Suddenly called by name, Haruyuki nodded nervously. “It’s...the new Armor. The...Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II.”

“What...”

“...the...?”

Decurion and Pound groaned different syllables. Lignum and Chafer clasped their hands together in front of their chests simultaneously, and even Graph moved his face mask a tiny bit.

“O-oh, but...I know we’re talking about those Society jerks, but can they really make something like that just because they decided to?!” Pound cried. “The original Armor possessed however many Burst Linkers over any number of years and ended up with some serious specs because of that!! How could they simply...?”

“I don’t think it was simple.” Haruyuki caught Pound’s gray eye lenses firmly. “The Society barged into the Hermes’ Cord race and showed off the power of the Incarnate System to the spectators. Next, they infected dozens of Burst Linkers with the ISS kits and poured their negative Incarnate into the kit main body. That was all to create a new Armor of Catastrophe. The Mark II they produced as a result goes far beyond the original in terms of sheer power alone. I know...I was the last Chrome Disaster.”

“.....”

Pound had once fought the Disasterfied Haruyuki and been broken. He fell silent now, his right hand over the place in his chest Haruyuki had smashed through then.

Shifting his gaze from Iron Pound to look at each of the green executives in turn, Haruyuki continued. “The newly born Mark II just lashed out like an Enemy. I couldn’t sense anything like intelligence. Even so, we couldn’t touch it...But we had some serious help, so we managed to check its movements, at least.”

It hadn’t only been Haruyuki, Takumu, and Chiyuri on that battlefield; Niko, Pard, and the Archangel Metatron had been right by their sides. And if Metatron hadn’t gone so far as to drain her own life force to protect him, Haruyuki would have taken a direct hit from Mark II’s nihilistic laser and been evaporated. But he couldn’t let their names slip yet. Offering a silent thanks in his heart once again, he brought his story to a close.

“But when we tried to revert it to the original Enhanced Armament, the Burst Linker that was the vessel had his global connection cut from the outside. Mark II is still in the hands of the Society. I don’t know what they’re planning to use it for, but the Mark II’s probably not their end goal, but a means to it. The Society’s leader said so. That for her, it was ‘hope.’” Having managed to fulfill his role, Haruyuki finished his speech with a small sigh.

“Hold on.” Decurion quickly raised a hand. “The Acceleration Research Society leader...Her? Silver Crow, you encountered their boss?”

“It wasn’t just Crow. She appeared before all the members of Nega Nebulus.” Kuroyukihime’s voice was hard and cold. The Black King thrust the sword tip of one leg into the marble with a *clang*, as if to say that this was the turning point for the meeting. She looked carefully at the seven members of Great Wall with her bluish-purple

eye lenses.

“The Acceleration Research Society’s headquarters are located in a school in Minato Ward Area Three. And their leader is the White King, White Cosmos...The Acceleration Research Society is an organization within the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe.”

This time, even the Green King reacted, albeit barely. His thick armor creaked, and his emerald-like square eye lenses blinked slowly.

The first to break the sudden and fearful silence was Lignum Vitae, who had spoken the least of all the members of the green camp at the meeting. Patterned after a tree, the F-type avatar pulled her slender body up straight as she murmured, “And this name...You say you have no proof?”

“We don’t. If we had any evidence, I would’ve hit Ivory Tower at the meeting of the Seven Kings last week,” Kuroyukihime replied evenly, crossing her sharp arms and staring at Grandé before her.

“We don’t have proof, but after fighting the Acceleration Research Society any number of times, we don’t need any. Nega Nebulus will attack Oscillatory Universe before the Society brings about a new catastrophe. Specifically, in the Territories, we will take down Minato Area Three, where their headquarters are, and make the other kings confirm the names of Society members that appear on the matching list. If we do that, then the conditions for launching a general attack decided on at the meeting by the Seven Legions—no, Six Legions—will be more than amply fulfilled.”

Taking in this decisive declaration of the Black King’s will, the Green King blinked his eye lenses once. He nodded, thick armor creaking, and broke his long silence. “If those conditions are fulfilled, then we have no objections personally to attacking white. However...”

Grandé switched back to silent mode, and in his place, his apparent spokesman, Iron Pound, announced, “However, Black King, you say you’re going to challenge Oscillatory in the Territories, but you can’t actually do that right now? Your Suginami and white’s Minato aren’t adjacent.”

“That’s exactly right. Thus, the reason I petitioned for this meeting today.” Nodding, Kuroyukihime let the second bomb drop in a smooth, silky voice.

“In order to attack the White Legion, Nega Nebulus requests the *return* of Shibuya Areas One and Two, currently territory held by Great Wall. I’d like to discuss the amount of compensation points another day.”

Whaaaaa—?! Haruyuki just barely swallowed the scream that had

been trying to claw its way out.

Takumu and Chiyuri, at his left, had both frozen. Fuko and the others on Kuroyukihime's right, perhaps having heard something about this beforehand or perhaps because they'd expected it, showed no signs of surprise, but the severity of their auras increased.

Kuroyukihime hadn't said "transfer," but rather "return." He remembered hearing somewhere before that the headquarters of the first Nega Nebulus hadn't been in Suginami, but Shibuya. Kuroyukihime moved to Suginami when she started at Umesato Junior High. Before that, she had lived with the White King at their family home in Minato, so it wasn't unnatural that her initial base was in the adjacent Shibuya.



But up until that point, Haruyuki had thought that Great Wall, with their headquarters in Meguro and Shinagawa to the south, had taken Shibuya of their own will once it became empty after the annihilation of the first Nega Nebulus. But based on the fact that Kuroyukihime had used the word *return*, did that mean there had been some kind of negotiation, a contract?

The conversation between the black and green kings from a week earlier returned to life in the back of his mind. Once the meeting of the Seven Kings was over, Kuroyukihime had asked Grandé in parting, “Grandé. Do you remember our conversation two years and eleven months ago?” The Green King had responded with just “Of course.” Kuroyukihime had then continued, “You do? Then...the time to choose will come soon.”

And it was two years and eleven months ago, August 2044, when everything had begun and ended. The black and green kings must have had some kind of negotiation regarding the transfer of control rights for the Shibuya area. So then, what exactly was “the time to choose”?

Haruyuki had been holding his breath, watching over the scene, but now he heard a familiar, distinctive voice.

“Wait...Wait, wait, wait—just hang on *un momento!*” Ash Roller groaned, his butt hovering above the bench, as clueless as Haruyuki about what was even happening. “R-return Shibuya to Negabu?! No chance in Hell even a middle rank Legion’d do that!”

“Of course, I’m not suggesting you return the territories for free. We will pay the appropriate compensation, Ash,” Fuko—master and parent to the man—explained soothingly.

“B-but, Master...Even still, I mean, territory’s not a thing you can just change in Brain Burst...”

This argument was surprisingly free of Ash speak, and it wasn’t Fuko who checked it, but rather an unexpected interjection from the green camp leader.

“We’ve already received compensation.”

The Green King’s declaration was apparently a surprise to Kuroyukihime as well. “What?” Her eye lenses flashed sharply. “And who did you receive that from, Grandé?”

“Me.” Graphite Edge broke his recent silence.

“Graph, you?” Kuroyukihime asked, indeed sounding surprised. “I *did* wonder if you joined Great Wall because you offered yourself as a hostage...”

“H-hostage?! What does that mean?!” This time, Haruyuki cried out in panic.

Kuroyukihime glanced at him and pondered her words. “Ten

minutes left?” she finally said. “Well, that’ll have to be enough. So then, let’s take a few minutes here to talk a bit about the past. About what happened two years and eleven months ago in the Shibuya area...”

Naturally, Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu, the three youngest members of the black camp, didn’t know the details of what had happened back then, nor did it seem that the green camp’s Lignum, Chafer, or Ash did. The tale Kuroyukihime told went uninterrupted, her voice playing in harmony with the gentle breeze of the Twilight stage.

“After the devastating defeat at the Castle, I decided to disband Nega Nebulus. Of course, I did consider naming someone to succeed me as master and having the Legion continue, but three of the Four Elements were in Unlimited EK, and the fourth had announced her intention to step back from the front lines, so that was also difficult. In which case, I would swallow that bitter pill and disband the Legion to allow the members to choose their own paths forward...But there still remained one unresolved issue—well, one bit of ego—inside of me.

“If I was to simply disband the Legion and leave the Accelerated World, Shibuya, our territory at the time, and the majority of my Legion members would have been absorbed into Oscillatory Universe. I wanted to avoid that situation at all costs. I couldn’t stand the idea of my comrades being made to dance like I had been by the White King, used up like pawns, and then selfishly thrown away. Thus, before breaking up the Legion, I met with Grandé and asked him to please be a home for the Shibuya area and the Black Legion members.

“A mere ten days earlier, I had tried to take the heads of the five other kings, including Grandé, in order to achieve level ten. So this was nothing short of scandalous...But I was that desperate. I threw myself down onto the ground the way Graph did earlier and pleaded with him. And Grandé said that the time to choose would come again at some point. And if I vowed not to run away then, he would accept my territory and my warriors...

“Of course, all I could do was promise. But I was still in elementary school at the time, and to be honest, I didn’t really understand what he meant. My only option was to abandon everything and hide away in the local net, so I couldn’t imagine what on earth he was asking me to choose...But although it’s hard for me to say, Grandé’s prophecy did come true. I met Silver Crow, I reformed Nega Nebulus, and I reached out to my old friends one at a time. And then the ‘time to choose’ came to me: whether to re-challenge the White King, when two years and eleven months ago all I could do was run away with my

tail between my legs.”

As if to let the listeners know she was approaching the end of her long tale, Kuroyukihime slowly uncrossed her legs.

“When I learned that Cosmos was the mastermind behind the Acceleration Research Society, I was indeed surprised, but I also felt like it could have been no one else. Now that I think about it, I may have even been expecting this somewhere deep in my heart, ever since I found out the ISS kit main body was in Tokyo Midtown Tower in the Minato area. Cosmos is the person I fear most in the Accelerated World. I don’t believe I could beat her if we fought one-on-one. Thus, I was naturally worried I’d be forced to decide if I should fight the White King. I worried that if I did challenge her, I might lose everything I love once more...But fleeing hasn’t been on the table this time. Because I made a vow to you, Grandé, that I would not run.”

Here, she let out a sigh that sounded like a faint laugh, but of course, the Green King didn’t so much as twitch. In the silence, the Black King continued.

“You heard my pleas, Grandé, and immediately after Nega Nebulus abdicated the Shibuya area, you made the declaration of territory and accepted into Great Wall all former members of Nega Nebulus who wished to join. But those who went to you and those who welcomed them must have felt a great deal of worry. Because the Legion Master has that powerful privilege of Judgment Blow. If, for instance, you had so desired, Grandé, it was possible system-wise for you to bring together all the players who transferred from Nega Nebulus and send them all to total point loss. Meanwhile, the native Great Wall members must have voiced their objections to accepting more than twenty people who until the day before had been their enemies.”

“They did,” Decurion assented. “At the time, I was first seat and Pound was second, and we were the very first to oppose the idea.”

“As you might expect.” Pound shrugged lightly. “That was something that would, for all intents and purposes, rip the Legion apart.”

“But in the end, the transfer took place, and Shibuya became green territory,” Kuroyukihime remarked. “I assumed that this was because of Grandé’s leadership...But it seems that this wasn’t the only reason. You were working behind the scenes back then, Graph.”

“Nah, it wasn’t such a big thing as all that.” The dual swordsman pulled back with a frown. “It was more like I met G—I mean, the Green King—and said ‘Hey, lemme join GW, please and thanks.’”

The way he talks like he had nothing to do with anything, that’s some fancy footwork.

But Haruyuki suddenly realized it wasn’t as simple as all that. Just

as Kuroyukihime had said, Legion Masters had Judgment Blow, an ability to unilaterally push Legion members to a forced uninstall. Graphite Edge had basically offered Green Grandé his own life. This was precisely what Kuroyukihime had meant by “hostage.”

“Graph!” Utai had apparently realized this some time ago, and now her voice was the most emotional he’d ever heard it. “You are always doing this! You never talk to the rest of us Elements; you just go and do whatever you want. And maybe we come to understand later that you’ve done it to help us, but that still doesn’t make us at all happy!”

A month ago, Utai had said to Haruyuki at the Castle, *“My power didn’t work on the God Suzaku at all. At the time of the previous Castle attack, I was the one who asked to lead the squad against Suzaku. I foolishly believed that if it was flames, then whatever the power, I would check it.”*

Utai had failed in the Castle attack and ended up in Unlimited EK together with Aqua Current and Graphite Edge, and she was convinced this was her own fault. Thus, she had developed under her own efforts the wide-ranging annihilation-type Incarnate technique in preparation for the mission to rescue Graphite Edge. Naturally, Graph was still sealed away at the Castle’s north gate in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but Utai also no doubt never expected to meet him again there that day.

“And indeed, while we may have both been Elements, there was a significant gap between my power and yours, Graph!” she shouted, as though things she had pushed down and hidden for a long time were finally breaking free. “If you’d wanted to, you could have gone up to level nine at any time and become a king—so perhaps it’s no wonder you treat us like children. But even so, we were supposed to be comrades coming together under the black flag. Why did you not at least *talk* to us before exposing yourself to danger?!”

Showered in the small shrine maiden’s scorching hot censure, the double sword user grabbed his knees with his hands and threw his head down. “Sorry, Denden—Maiden. And to you, too, Raker, and you, Current.”

This time, Decurion kept quiet about the first seat potentially embarrassing himself and the Green Legion.

Graph kept his head down for a full three seconds before finally pulling himself up and continuing in a more serious voice. “I’m sorry for not talking to you about transferring to GW. But if this became public, I figured, I dunno, it’d like upset the balance of power in the Accelerated World, y’know? So I asked G and Veri to keep me joining GW a secret.”

“I *did* wonder at first what you were up to,” Decurion interjected,

shaking the large horns of his helmet from side to side. "Back then, I was pretty hot-blooded, you know? And then you said you'd do this if you could beat me in a duel."

Now Pound shook his headgear in something like exasperation. "When you came and told us the Five Armors were now Six, and we were each going down a seat, Veri, I was seriously wondering what the hell was up."

"Me too," Lignum agreed.

"I was, as well," Chafer chimed in.

"Aaah, man, I been nothing but trouble for you guys, too, huh?" Scratching his head, Graph shifted his gaze upward. "Whoa, only five minutes left? We'd better hurry up...Um, Denden said I coulda gone up to level nine anytime, but there's no way I can now. You're probably going to get mad at me for going off on my own again, but as compensation for Shibuya, I paid all my extra points to G."

"...What?" Kuroyukihime managed, sounding frightened. "Incidentally, how many points was it?"

"You'd be freaked, Lota, so I'm not telling. Anyway, G split 'em up into tiny pieces and fed 'em to the Enemies. So, like, now's your chance! Double bonus Enemy appearance, limited time only! Ha-ha-ha!"

"...Seriously?" Ash muttered.

Wow, Haruyuki thought before refocusing on the matter at hand.

The price that Kuroyukihime had intended to pay for the return of Shibuya Areas Nos. 1 and 2 had apparently been paid by Graphite Edge. In other words, the Green King had already accepted this payment and spent it—although not for his own self-interest, but rather for the sake of the continued existence of the Accelerated World—so Haruyuki supposed he could take this to mean that the return of Shibuya was only a matter of time.

Huh...Is Shibuya really Nega Nebulus territory now? Just temporarily? Permanently? Unable to keep up with the situation, Haruyuki looked absently at the surrounding skyscrapers.

"But, like, it's not as simple as all that," Graph said, as if reading Haruyuki's mind. "Great Wall occupied Shibuya bloodlessly three years ago. Snatched it right out from under the nose of Oscillatory Universe when they were seriously after Shibuya. As for the deets about what actually went down...Right after Negabu got knocked down in the Castle attack, Oscillatory showed up to attack Shibuya One and Two in the Territories. If a war had started then, both areas would've definitely fallen."

Kuroyukihime nodded wordlessly. One eye on her, Graph continued.

"But a mere five seconds before four PM, the start time for the

Territories, Lota unleashed her clever scheme to abandon Shibuya. The instant the area was unoccupied, Oscillatory's registered attack was automatically canceled, and then GW registered an attack on both areas right away. Oscillatory couldn't reregister before the start time, and since the only attacker was GW, they took control without a fight. You already had the mutual nonaggression pact between GW and Oscillatory, so Oscillatory couldn't attack Shibuya again. And now it's been three years like that. And there's been this weird tension between the two Legions ever since. Of course, they weren't clashing in the Territories, but in normal duels around Ebisu and Aoyama, more than a few members of GW no doubt slammed up against Oscillatory's Seven Dwarves."

Graph paused there, and Pound snorted.

"They didn't take me down fifteen times in a row or anything, but I did get my ass handed to me."

"Yup. Can't chicken out against that gang," Chafer agreed.

It was true that the antagonism between green and white seemed out of the ordinary. But was that actually a factor in backing the return of the Shibuya to Nega Nebulus? After all, the whole point of the return was a direct attack on Oscillatory, something Great Wall couldn't do.

As if he once again had read Haruyuki's mind, Graph quickly shook his head. "It's exactly because of this cold war that returning Shibuya right now would be taken as an obvious act of aggression on the part of GW toward Oscillatory. They'd see it as breaking the mutual nonaggression pact for all intents and purposes. Oscillatory might even go so far as to attack Meguro or Shinagawa. It's just like Raker said before—GW has to choose total cooperation with Negabu or break off all contact...Nah, just breaking off contact prob'ly wouldn't do it. If GW refuses to return Shibuya, you're planning to take them down in the Territories, yeah, Lota?"

"Of course," she responded immediately.

Decurion and Pound flashed their eye lenses sharply. But Grandé maintained his usual silence, and Graph also only nodded lightly before turning his face mask upward again.

"Three minutes...Well, at any rate, we're at the heart of it here. I said it before, but I already paid the price for Shibuya Areas One and Two with my savings from the old Negabu days. But that alone's not gonna convince Veri and the gang here, much less the other Legion members. And me, too. I gotta go through the proper channels one way or another as the first seat of Great Wall's Six Armors. That's why, Lota—Lotus. I won't say you gotta go through the formality of the Territories. But we're gonna need you to show us the power you got now."

The ink-black swordsman of the dual blades turned the masculine lines of his face mask toward the seven members of Nega Nebulus and, in a voice as weighty as that of the Green King, declared, “We’re shifting to Battle Royale mode. Fight with everything you’ve got—Show us your resolve. That’s the other condition for the return of Shibuya.”



Time inched forward. The second this thought occurred to Mihaya Kakei, a shout bounced off the walls of the definitely-not-large room.

“Aaah, come oooooon! I can’t wait anymoooooore!” The voice was owned by a girl with pigtails red like flames. Upside down on the sofa, she kicked her legs up and down before yanking herself upright. “Hey, Pard? How ’bout we actually sneak into Shibuya ourselves?! If we just watch from a corner of the stage, no one’ll notice us! Prob’ly!”

“No,” she retorted curtly, glancing at the old analogue clock on the wall.

Two forty-five. At the strike of three, the meeting between the top levels of Nega Nebulus and Great Wall would start in the Shibuya area. That would be, at most, 1.8 seconds from start to finish, so they’d hear about the result soon enough, but the fifteen minutes until that time felt like an eternity. Mihaya wasn’t a patient person to begin with—or rather, she was generally acknowledged by herself and others as being an impatient alien—so she desperately wanted to go along with her boss’s proposal, which meant she had to nip that excitement in the bud right here and now.

“If we snuck into the meeting and green found us, they’d destroy us. And we won’t make it in time on my bike anyway.”

“Unh, I knooooow. I was just *saying*.” The redheaded girl leaned her back up against the sofa and let out a sigh. The childishness of the person who had upended the Accelerated World with her fierce fighting style, the very picture of her eleven years, brought a faint, unconscious smile to Mihaya’s lips. To hide it, she picked up her teacup from the low table and took a sip of the unsweetened apple tea.

They were in Mihaya’s room in the back of the first floor of Patisserie La Plage, a cake shop in Sakuradai, within Nerima Ward. There were no windows, and the door and walls were made of material that blocked electromagnetic waves, so connecting their Neurolinkers to the global net required a direct connection to the router in the table.

Her aunt, who essentially ran the shop as the chef/pâtissier, rolled

her eyes at the idea of a room where you couldn't use wireless in this day and age and never came near the place, but that was actually a blessing. Because this small Western-style room was, for all intents and purposes, the command room of the Red Legion, Prominence.

"That reminds me, Pard. You take your level-eight bonus yet?" asked the girl, Prominence's Legion Master and the second Red King, the Immobile Fortress, known as Scarlet Rain and, in the real world, Yuniko Kozuki.

Mihaya shook her head. "Not yet."

"Whoa. So even you can't decide on a level-eight bonus? But you totally snapped up the 'normal running on all surfaces' at seven," Niko teased, grinning.

Although Mihaya was five years older, she wanted to purse her lips like a child. "*You* couldn't decide on your level-eight bonus, either."

"*That* was because anyone'd have trouble picking between a heavy cannon and a laser cannon! You can't know which one does what without some research..."

"I'm doing the research now," Mihaya replied smoothly, having only just jumped up to level eight from level six the other day, and took another sip of tea.

She couldn't exactly whine in front of Niko, but the pressure for level eight was more than she'd expected. Outside of the Seven Kings, eight was essentially the highest level, and the way people treated her was different, not to mention the increased number of points taken when she lost to a middle ranker in a duel. As the leader of the Triplex, Prominence's executive group, she felt like she'd fought with everything she had so far, but apparently, somewhere in her heart, she'd been spoiled by that little number six in her level.

Sky Raker, Mihaya's most worthy rival and the vice deputy of Nega Nebulus, had her sights set on the loftiest of goals and had been fighting with this enormous pressure bearing down on her for some time now. And Mihaya had no doubt she would make it through with her usual cool—even when confronted with the powerful warriors of Great Wall she was about to face.

She'd told Niko they couldn't, but she *did* want to be present at that meeting, and it was hard to completely banish that nagging thought from her head. The Acceleration Research Society had kidnapped her leader, whom she loved more than anyone, and then, after hanging her from a cross, had stolen four parts of her infamous Enhanced Armament, Invincible. Although Pard and her friends had gotten three of these back, thanks to the awesome special ability of Nega Nebulus's Watch Witch, Lime Bell, which could rewind status changes, the thruster block was still in the hands of the Society.

Niko acted like she wasn't bothered at all, but there was no way she wasn't worried about it deep in her heart. It was Mihaya's duty as the deputy leader to take the fight to the Society and get the thrusters back.

They'd taken a step forward in learning that the Acceleration Research Society, long shrouded in mystery, was, in fact, an organization within the White Legion, of all things. This showed again just how difficult it was going to be to fight the Society.

The Black Legion had decided on a frontal attack to take down Minato Area No. 3, the location of the White Legion headquarters. The meeting that day was the first step, and Mihaya understood there was essentially no other choice. However, even if negotiations with the Green Legion were successful, and Shibuya Area No. 2, adjacent to Minato Area No. 3, was returned to Nega Nebulus, that didn't mean that Mihaya would be able to fight the White Legion. Only members of Nega Nebulus would be able to participate in the Territories; as a member of Prominence, Mihaya would not have that right.

When the Black Legion pulled back the curtain on the Society and the Six Legions' joint attack mission was activated, she would, of course, be running at the front of the pack. But the fact that she would have to wait until then was actually very frustrating. Attack immediately when things started to move; *this* was the policy of Bloody Kitty, Blood Leopard/Mihaya, after all.

"So, like, Pard?" Niko said, a little anxiety bleeding into her voice, while Mihaya stared at the painfully slow hands of the clock as she let her thoughts race.

"What?"

"For example, 'kay? ...I was thinkin' maybe it's time to talk to Cassi and Pokki, too. But I dunno."

"...Hmm." Even the immediately decisive Mihaya couldn't answer this right away.

Cassi, aka Cassis Mousse, and Pokki, aka Thistle Porcupine, were the second and third of Prominence's Triplex. Both had distinguished themselves during the period of chaos immediately after the disappearance of the former Red King and served admirably in supporting the new Prominence both in public and behind the scenes, and thus, they were both more attached to the Legion than Mihaya was.

For those two, the "talk" that Niko was thinking about having would have been relatively shocking. If they didn't take the time to carefully explain things, it could even rip the Legion apart once more.

"Maybe it'd be better to talk to just Cassi first, instead of both of them together," Mihaya offered hesitantly.

"Yeah." Niko nodded, a complicated look on her face. "Pokki'll

prob'ly explode when word hits the street. Gotta have Cassi there to hold 'im back. Still, Cassi's pretty stubborn and all, too."

"Cassi likes sweets. Offer her some cake. Maybe that'll make things easier."

"Oh, good idea. Okay. Maybe your Cassi's Mousse Tart's the thing that'll put us over the top."

"Maybe."

They both laughed briefly and then looked at the clock. Two more minutes until three.

"Bout that time, huh?" Niko muttered, plugging a cable into the XSB connector built into the table before connecting it to her own Neurolinker. Mihaya did the same, and the icon for a global net connection was displayed in her field of view.

Right about now, the seven members of Nega Nebulus were also counting down the time remaining somewhere in Shibuya. All they could do now in distant Nerima was pray that the negotiations—the first step toward the decisive final battle with the Acceleration Research Society—went well.

"Let's take a cake and go see them when they're back," Mihaya said.

Niko looked a little surprised, and then her large eyes that looked green in the right light shone. "Yeah. But can your bike hold ten cakes, Pard?"

"NP," she responded, beginning the final countdown.

They had pressed Kuroyukihime and the others to tell them what had happened as soon as the meeting was over, so even with the time it took to utter the voice command, they should have gotten a call around five seconds past three.

The hands on the analogue clock on the wall moved ever so slowly as if to thwart her.

2:59:57 PM. Fifty-eight seconds. Fifty-nine seconds.

Three o'clock.

3:00:01. Two seconds. Three. Four. Five.

Six. Seven. Eight...

Niko and Pard have got to be freaking out right about now, Haruyuki thought as he looked down at the confirmation dialog box before him.

It was, of course, not the first time he'd seen the message written in English—something to the effect of `YOU HAVE BEEN INVITED TO A BATTLE ROYALE. YES/NO`. He'd gone from the Gallery to a Battle Royale a million times before.

But just this once, he had a hard time keeping his head on his shoulders. Naturally, he was nervous about fighting the powerful warriors of Great Wall, but what loomed far larger was that two from the group gathered there were kings—level niners.

“Kuroyukihime, is this really all right?” Haruyuki asked in a hushed tone as he shifted his eyes from the dialog box to the avatar beside him.

She had already pressed the `YES` button, and yet, Kuroyukihime shrugged slightly. “Well...”

“Well? That’s kinda— I mean, this isn’t the actual Territories, so that level-nine sudden-death rule applies, right?”

“That is true. And it wasn’t a normal duel in which I took Red Rider’s head, but a Battle Royale.”

“S-so then maybe you shouldn’t? If the worst happens, I...” Haruyuki tried to change her mind for the nth time.

“I appreciate your concern, Crow.” Kuroyukihime lightly patted his shoulder with the flat part of her sword hand. “But I can’t be the only one to remain in the Gallery. When I do eventually come face-to-face with the White King, we, too, will be fighting under sudden death. And in this Battle Royale, Grandé and I have promised not to fight each other directly. If he was the sort to renege on that and come for my head, he wouldn’t have agreed to a meeting like this in the first place. In fact, if either of us was going to be nervous about this, I’d expect it to be him.”

Haruyuki glanced over at the green camp standing firm a little ways off. The Green King and Graphite Edge had apparently both been in on the plan to switch the meeting to Battle Royale mode for a mock Territory battle. But it seemed to be news to the members of the

executive from Viridian Decurion down, and while they agreed with the basic idea, Iron Pound was furiously counseling the Green King about something or other.

Unconsciously perking his ears, Haruyuki heard not an argument to stop the king from participating, but a specific strategy proposal on how to keep him safe on the battlefield.

Not about to be outdone, Haruyuki turned to Kuroyukihime. “I understand. But you totally can’t charge into the enemy camp. Try to stay to the rear.”

“Heeey!” A laid-back voice came from the green camp. The speaker was the one who proposed the Battle Royale mode, the double sword user. “Thirty seconds left! Who still hasn’t pressed the button?”

Hurriedly turning his gaze upward, Haruyuki saw that the timer that had started at 1,800 seconds had only thirty seconds left. “Uh, um, anyway...I’ll protect you, Kuroyukihime!” he declared, stretching a finger out to the dialog box.

Before he knew it, Fuko, Utai, Akira, Takumu, and Chiyuri had gathered around them. He looked at the faces of his trusty comrades in turn and nodded sharply before pressing the YES button.

A BATTLE ROYALE IS BEGINNING!! The flaming text burned bright red before his eyes. Ten seconds until the mode switch.

“Don’t worry, Haru. We’re totally going to win this!” Chiyuri declared in a very quiet but resolute voice and then slapped him on the back. His childhood friend was always there to cheer him on.

“Yeah. Let’s do it!” he replied, clenching his hands into tight fists. The countdown burned flashily as the numbers dropped steadily toward zero.

Klang! Silver Crow’s health gauge popped up in the upper left of his field of view, and the color of the sky began to change. The eternal evening sun of the Twilight stage sank into the horizon with incredible speed. Indigo blue painted over the madder-red, then became quickly overtaken by black.

A night stage. Moonlight? Cemetery? Or maybe Bizarre Festival?

Krrrr! A powerful quake made the buildings of the stage shudder and shake. Haruyuki hurriedly looked around, only to be confronted with an entirely unexpected sight:

The ground of the duel stage was caving in. Ravine Square centered around Shibuya Station was safe for the time being, but the buildings in the direction of Dogenzaka and Miyamasu-zaka were swallowed up one after another, leaving nothing but massive holes where they once stood. The countless craters expanded and joined up with one another until, finally, all that was left of the ground were a few blocks like floating islands.

At last, the ten-story building where the black and green teams

stood was ripped in half with a loud roar midway between their encampments. Broken into north and south sides, the pieces of Ravine Square gradually began to pull away from one another. The other islands scattered throughout the stage also appeared to be moving freely.

Haruyuki had never seen a stage like this. He looked down over the edge of the rupture, wondering what was in the holes, and groaned. "What?! Th-there's no bottom!!"

All he could see was an infinite darkness that absorbed all light.

No, wait...He couldn't make out what they were exactly, but he could see a few small lights bobbing around. The lights immediately increased in number, glittering a cool white or blue or red. They were...

"Stars?" Takumu murmured beside him.

Indeed, the lights looked like nothing other than stardust. But how could there be stars beneath the ground?

"Hey," Chiyuri spoke then from directly behind, her voice hoarse. "Up. Look up. Up."

"Huh?" Obediently, Haruyuki turned his face upward at the same time as Takumu.

"Whoa!" They cried together, almost drowning out Utai's admiring "That's amazing..."

A starry night spread out above their heads as well. But this was totally different from the sad sky of the Moonlight or Cemetery stages; it was *bright*. Against a jet-black background, countless stars completely filled the heavens, with red, blue, and yellow galaxies adding dashes of vivid color. It was almost like they were looking up from a point immediately beside the central part of the galaxy.

"Oh!" Haruyuki cried out again. "Th-this stage, it can't be...!"

"It does seem to be doing the impossible," Kuroyukihime assented, unable to hide her own surprise. "I thought it would be implemented today, but I never dreamed we would draw it here. There's no mistake. This is the Space stage."

"But we're still able to stand normally," Akira noted, and the seven looked down. It was true that their avatar feet stood firmly on the cracked tiles of the building's roof and showed no signs of floating up due to lack of gravity.

"So then does the Space stage just *look* like space, but still has gravity?" Chiyuri sounded a little let down.

"N-noooooo!" A throaty cry echoed through the stage. "Hey! Somebody! Gimme a haaaaaand!"

Haruyuki turned his face up again and saw against the background of the magnificent sky the century-end rider bobbing upward. "Oh, he's floating..."

Takumu pushed up his nonexistent glasses as he remarked, "Apparently, gravity stops working if you jump carelessly. So I guess if you have no means of propulsion, you need to fight with your feet on the ground of the floating island."

"That's not necessarily the case if you can attack at long-distance," Akira remarked. "You can just shoot the enemies on floating islands while you float in the zero-gravity space."

Haruyuki nodded. Thinking about it now, in anime set in space, they fired beam rifles or missiles and things at one another, and it seemed okay to assume that those principles applied in the Space stage as well. But then...

"...We might be in trouble," he said.

"...?"

Akira turned around and raised a questioning eyebrow, so he explained his concerns.

"Um. It was like this in the Hermes' Cord race, too, but there's no air in the Space stage, so I won't be able to fly."

"Huh," Chiyuri said like it had nothing to do with her and cocked her head to one side. "But even without air, it's not hard to breathe. And we can talk and all."

"C-c'mon, don't go digging too deep," he said on behalf of the BB system, then realized something with a gasp. He shot his gaze back toward Akira and jabbed a finger with a *splsh* into Aqua Current's flowing water armor, which glittered beautifully in the light of the galaxy. A small ripple spread out on the surface.

"Hey! What're you doing, Crow?!" Chiyuri jabbed him in his side.

"I—I wasn't!" He hurried to defend himself. "I mean! I was just thinking space is supposed to be absolute zero, but Curren's armor's not freezing."

This time, Fuko interjected from his right. "You're not quite right there, Crow. Space is actually filled with microwaves known as cosmic background radiation, and because of that, it's just a few degrees warmer than absolute zero."

"...B-but that's still, like, minus two hundred seventy Celsius, right?" he replied. "You can't call that warm."

"Hee-hee, I suppose not. Actually, there's no heat or cold in this Space stage, hmm? ...I don't feel warmth or wind or smell anything." Indeed, the thin dress Fuko wore and the ribbon on her hat were not fluttering in the wind.

"Hmm." Kuroyukihime looked up at the starry sky. "If I had to name the attribute, I'd say it was 'nihilistic,' perhaps. It seems we'll have to test a variety of things to see what's effective and what's not. At any rate...shall we smash the things in the area and build up our gauges?"

“I guess we should.” Haruyuki nodded and tried to crush the concrete pillar standing beside him with a punch. The strength of the terrain objects was not as bad as the Twilight stage, but they were still fairly brittle.

His comrades similarly smashed pillars and walls, and when the floating island had essentially become flat terrain, they heard a sad cry from Great Wall’s island some thirty meters away.

“No! Nooooooooooooo! Mighty me! My super-machiiiiine! Aaaaaah!!” Ash Roller, floating in zero-gravity space, was straddling his motorcycle, which he had summoned at some point, and was going hard on the accelerator. But the apple of his eye, the V-twin engine, didn’t so much as squeak.

“Ohhh. There’s no air, so that old-style engine doesn’t work,” Haruyuki said as he watched. *This is going to make for a pretty tough battle for Ash and me.*

And then Lignum Vitae turned the parasol she’d been using to destroy terrain objects toward Ash. The wooden shaft slid out and grew longer, and the sharp stone tip caught the wheel of the motorcycle. She pulled the umbrella back down, and the bike approached the wobbling island before both tires finally made contact with the ground. Then the umbrella returned to its original length in an instant with a sharp *Shf!*

“Ooh!” Chiyuri stared intently at the green camp. “That parasol’s great! Stretching and shrinking like that seems super-handy. I wonder where they sell them.”

“Unfortunately, Bell,” Akira said, “that umbrella is Lignum’s initial setting equipment, so I doubt it’s sold in any shop.”

“Tch!” Chiyuri *tsked* in disappointment.

Meanwhile, Haruyuki noticed that Utai, a little ways off, had a complicated look on her face. Being careful not to jump, he took a few steps and asked quietly, “Mei, is something the matter?”

“Oh! Yes, I’m sure this will be difficult for you, C, but I think I will be facing some issues, as well.”

He stared hard at the small shrine maiden, wondering what on earth her “issues” could be before finally realizing it. “Oh! R-right... Without air, flames...”

“Yes. My flame attacks will most likely be ineffective. In such an important fight, it seems I will only drag the rest of you down.” Utai hung her head dejectedly.

Haruyuki unconsciously put his hands on her shoulders. “I-it’ll be o—” Before he could get the last syllable out, Utai was yanked away.

ICBM, aka Fuko, lifted her up from behind. “It’s okay, Maiden. Even without the fire damage, your bow is strong enough. I’ll make up for whatever’s missing.” She squeezed Utai tightly and then threw her

head back and shouted, "Equip Gale Thruster!!"

From the starry heavens, two streaks of light shot down into Fuko's back, followed by a blinding flash. Her dress and hat scattered and disappeared to reveal the flowing lines of an Enhanced Armament on her back. These rocket boosters that Haruyuki himself had once borrowed contained overwhelming thrust power.

Fuko would be able to use them without any problems at all. In fact, they were originally created to fly in this stage: Sky Raker's wings.

With Gale Thruster equipped, Fuko gently set Utai down before the high heels of her feet clacked against the ground. Her previously soft aura was completely gone now. "Silver Crow said it at the top of Hermes' Cord," she said boldly. "I, Sky Raker, am a space-battle duel avatar, born to fly across the ocean of stars. Here, today, I will prove those words true."

"Mm. I'm counting on you, Raker," Kuroyukihime agreed. "The rule is that I can't cut down the enemy camp, so I leave the front line to you. Rip them to shreds."

"Of course!" Fuko replied.

Perhaps the snappy exchange between Legion Master and Submaster reached the enemy camp some dozens of meters away. The seven members of Great Wall dropped into ready positions as one on the floating island drifting to the south. It seemed that they, too, had finished analyzing the new stage and charging their special-attack gauges. The timer had 1,523 seconds remaining.

Haruyuki instinctively understood that the battle would start the instant the numbers reached 1,500. Still, there weren't many options for a crow that couldn't fly. At best, he could be someone's shield.

"...Ah, no, hang on a sec," he muttered, staring at the enemy team again.

The Green King had retreated to the rear of the island and set the great shield Strife solidly down in front of him. Standing in a row before him were the gladiator, Viridian Decurion; the boxer, Iron Pound; the kung fu artist, Suntan Chafer; the somehow treelike Lignum Vitae; Ash Roller, still straddling the motionless motorcycle; and the dual swordsman clad in black, Graphite Edge.

"Um, Kuroyukihime?" Haruyuki asked. "Do they not have any long-distance types over there?"

"Hmm?" she responded. "Mm, quite possibly."

"At most, the missiles of Ash's bike," Haruyuki agreed. "But he can't fire continuously, and we have Mei with her bow and Pile with his long-distance special attack. So couldn't we win by just getting them to shoot all they want?"

"That's the feeling I'm getting." Akira nodded sharply.

The two islands were already more than thirty meters apart. To cross this distance with a jump would require a powerful leap with a running start, but anyone who did that would fly off into the starry sky like Ash Roller had.

“.....”

The members of Nega Nebulus exchanged curious looks, and the remaining time reached 1,500 seconds. Haruyuki and his comrades had let their guards down for a mere instant. But in that moment, the enemy had already gained the upper hand.

Graphite Edge jumped up lightly in the center of the enemy line, leaned forward, and bent his legs up underneath him. And then Iron Pound launched a hard right straight at the soles of his feet.

Bwum! The shock wave shook the stage, and the body of the swordsman came flying at them with a force so intense it was as though he had fired up hidden boosters. By kicking at Pound’s right straight with perfect timing, Graph managed to accelerate suddenly along the horizontal. This way, there was no chance of him flying up into the sky.

“Incoming!”

At the sound of Kuroyukihime’s voice, Utai pulled back the bowstring of her longbow, Flame Caller. The string hummed, and the arrow that launched drew out a silvery tail instead of a flaming one as it streaked toward the sword user’s face mask.

But Graph caught Utai’s arrow with the flat of the longsword he drew from his right shoulder. *Clang!* The arrow was repelled without fuss and disappeared into the stars.

“Nngh!” Haruyuki stepped forward as if in a trance and readied his fists. Of all the members of the black team, the metallic-colored Silver Crow had the greatest resistance to swords—severing attacks. He would have to step up and take on Graphite Edge.

But having drawn just the one sword, Graph took yet another unexpected action. Still flying through the zero-gravity space, he brandished the blade high and shouted what was probably the name of a special attack, “Vertical Square!!”

The longsword slashed out four times on an upward trajectory, so fast it was invisible to the eye. The vivid-blue swipes drew an enormous square in the empty space. But Graph was still so far from Haruyuki. There was no way the sword tips would reach him.

Empty swinging? Just a demonstration?

But it was not. Although the blue square, three meters on each side, seemed to be just a light effect, it moved forward instead of disappearing, tumbling end over end, and touched the black team’s island. Haruyuki felt a powerful vibration beneath his feet, and the square of light closed in on him, ripping the concrete island apart.

“Run, Crow!” Kuroyukihime shouted from behind.

Haruyuki threw his body to one side. The blue light grazed the tip of his right foot, sending tiny sparks scattering. And then the square sank into the center of the thirty-meter island, and he lost sight of it.

A second later, the island split in two with a *krrrk*.

“Wh-whoa!” Hurriedly clutching at the ground, Haruyuki felt the virtual gravity suddenly weaken. The weight of his duel avatar was essentially halved, and the fierce shaking of the island threatened to throw him off.

“G-gang!” He somehow managed to stabilize himself and turned around to see Takumu, Chiyuri, and Kuroyukihime standing on the same half of the island—and Fuko, Utai, and Akira on the other, legs spread and hips lowered to find their balance.

Most likely, the smaller the islands got when they were blown apart, the weaker the gravity they generated. The accuracy of shots fired from such an unstable foothold was doubtful.

But the bigger problem was whether Graphite Edge had slashed into the island with the aim of weakening gravity for the black team. If he had, then that meant that the swordsman knew the Space stage.

The black-clad avatar came down to land soundlessly on Haruyuki’s chunk of island. Seemingly unperturbed by the unreliable gravity, he stood perfectly still.

“Never dreamed we’d get the Space stage when it was only just implemented,” Graph drawled, resting the sword in his hand on his shoulder. “You were the last one to press the button, yeah, Silver Crow? So you’re lucky. Or not.”

What? So does that mean I’m the one who got us this stage? Haruyuki panicked.

From directly behind him, a sharp voice shot out.

“You speak as though it’s not your first time in the Space stage. Have you been here before, Graph?” Kuroyukihime snapped from behind, only to come out and hover in front of him.

“No way.” The black dual swordsman shrugged lightly. “Of course it’s my first time. But I’ve fought plenty in other games on a similar map. As a general rule, players with long-distance techniques’re at a lopsided advantage when it comes to space. So I’m just leveling the field.” He had no sooner made this statement than he was lazily brandishing the sword he bore.

“Slant!” Together with the technique name, he brought his blade down diagonally. The blue sword of light slashed directly in front of Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime and cut a straight line into the gray concrete.

Krrkaan! The ground shook once again. Cut apart in a single blow of the special attack, the floating island shuddered and split. Haruyuki

hurried to grab hold of the foothold that was now a quarter its original size, but the gravity decreased even further, and he basically couldn't feel the weight of his avatar at all anymore.

As if Graph's second blow was a signal, five avatars, excluding Grandé—Ash Roller had gotten off his motorcycle—leapt forward from the green camp island a few dozen meters away. Apparently, they intended to turn the fight into a low-gravity group melee and nullify any long-distance attacks.

But just as Haruyuki had guessed earlier, jumping diagonally upward meant that they quickly left the sphere of the island's gravity and flew toward the stars. Still on all fours, Haruyuki watched with wide eyes, wondering how the green team would manage to change their trajectories.

"Distant Shield." The sonorous technique call came from behind the group flying through the air. The owner of the voice was the Green King, alone on the floating island. He held the great shield up high with his right arm and then brought it down hard against the ground.

Zzzsshrn! The shock wave spread out, and a massive cross appeared in front of the five members of Great Wall. This was exactly the same color and shape as the Strife, but transparent enough that the stars behind it were visible.

And yet, it had substance. Iron Pound and the others kicked off the vision of the shield one after the other to change the angle of their jumps.

"Here they come!" Chiyuri shouted.

"I'll handle Graph!" Kuroyukihime shouted, quickly doling out instructions: "Pile and Bell, Maiden and Current, team up and take on the enemy! Crow, Raker, you're ranging!"

"Roger!!" the six members of Nega Nebulus called out in unison and dropped into position to meet the oncoming attack.

Aiming for Pound and the others approaching from the sky above, Utai began shooting arrows at them. The majority of these were knocked aside by Viridian Decurion's buckler, but they seemed to be effective as a challenge. The five avatars pushed at one another in midair to split into two groups, and Decurion and Pound came down toward the chunk of rock where Utai and the others were encamped, while Lignum, Chafer, and Ash fell toward Haruyuki's island.

Standing up very carefully from the ground in the weak gravity, Haruyuki moved away from Kuroyukihime and readied himself alongside Takumu and Chiyuri. The role he'd been instructed to play was roving attacker, but if three enemies were coming in, then he had to be there to welcome them.

A second later, the F-type avatar duo of Lignum and Chafer stuck

their landing rather splendidly, while Ash, behind them, hit the ground on all fours.

“Um, Ash!” Haruyuki impulsively called out as the century-end rider moved to stand up ever so fearfully. “Why’d you come here without your bike?”

“Shaddup! You’re one to talk! You can’t fly with no air!”

With this fact pointed out so succinctly, Haruyuki could do nothing but fall silent with a pouting frown. When he thought about it, the last time he’d fought a motorcycle-less Ash Roller had been the second duel they had after Haruyuki had become a Burst Linker. That time, although he’d clearly been a total newb, he’d managed to win the tough fight, but it had been eight months since then. He’d be wise not to assume Ash’s actual fighting power was the same as it had been then.

“I understand. I’ll keep my guard up!” Haruyuki declared, readying his hands before him.

But the avatar in the Qipao dress gestured for Ash to step back. “Ash, team up with Lignum. I will fight Silver Crow first.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki cried as the same time as Ash howled “whyyyy?!”

Rather than answer them, however, Suntan did a short, elegant, and fierce martial arts demonstration, reminiscent of the kata for Chinese *kenpō*. She settled into a relaxed pose as though they were in a totally normal gravity environment instead of one-fourth the usual. “You will show me the skill that won against my brother Pound one-on-one!”

“O-oh, that’s—!”

That’s when I was Chrome Disaster.

She didn’t give him the chance to give voice to the words. Walking like she was gliding smoothly across the cracked concrete, Suntan rapidly closed the distance between them.

“Ya!” The right hand that was thrust forward with the short battle cry was not clenched into a fist. Haruyuki immediately surmised that this was a palm strike to his face and tried to bring his arms up to guard.

However, Suntan’s palm only gently touched Haruyuki’s left wrist. There was no damage, but a cold chill raced up his spine. He hurried to pull his arms back, but the palm had already snapped shut around his wrist.

Giving him no chance to escape, she twisted his left arm inward, and his elbow and shoulder joints squealed violently at the limit of their range of movement.

Now!

Suntan launched a palm strike with her left hand.

“Nngh!” He just barely managed to guard with his right arm, but in the moment of impact, sparks shot out from the overextended joints of his left. Together with a sharp pain, his health gauge was cut down about 5 percent.

Gritting his teeth beneath his goggles, Haruyuki belatedly grasped what was going on. One-quarter gravity meant that the force of simple striking attacks was also one-quarter or even less. Just kicking or punching wouldn’t have any real effect, and there was also the risk that the reaction would send you floating up off the ground. The only way to deal any accurate damage in a hand-to-hand fight in this situation was to grab hold of your opponent and launch strikes, or use judo locking techniques. Suntan’s attack—pushing his right arm to the limit and striking with her left hand—was a high-level technique that did both simultaneously. Most likely, Suntan and the others had been lectured in advance by Graph on how to fight in the low-gravity environment of the Space stage.

His thoughts racing, Haruyuki tried to somehow pull his wrist free from its extreme position, but Suntan’s hand was glued to him and refused to let go.

“It’s no use!” she shouted. “My palm is an aggregate of tiny suction cups. You cannot break free with force!”

“Wha—?”

That’s scary! The thought flashed through his mind, but he felt like he’d read somewhere that insects that could climb up glass did indeed have feet like that.

“Okay then!” Enduring the pain in his left arm, Haruyuki launched a roundhouse kick with his right leg. If they were joined at their arms, then it stood to reason he could also hit her.

“You’re soft!” With exquisite timing, she yanked on his left arm and knocked his kick off track. She easily guarded against it with the thick armor of her left forearm and launched her own quick kick in response.

“Ha!” Her leg stretched out directly above him in an impeccable vertical kick, scraped his lower jaw, and carried away another 3 percent of his gauge.

Haruyuki was definitely not bad at close-range, hand-to-hand combat. That was, in fact, his main attack style. But his own distinctive flavor of that was high-speed, three-dimensional movement, so he was at a disadvantage when he was forced to cling to his opponent like this. He had to somehow drag her into his playing field.

If I can’t get my arm back! Haruyuki strengthened his resolve and sank down.

“Hngaah!” He jumped as hard as he could. It seemed that Suntan

didn't have suction cups on the soles of her feet, at least, and she pulled away from the ground with Haruyuki clinging to her.

"What is this?!" Suntan hurriedly tried to let go of him, and now it was Haruyuki grabbing her wrist and pulling her closer. The weak gravity vanished in a flash, and they started to ascend into the infinite starry night. The only way they were going to return to one of the islands was if they hit the stage boundary somewhere in the distance above or used a special attack that generated some kind of kinetic energy.

"Hey! Let go of me!" Suntan shouted, her voice tinged with an edge of panic as she tried to kick Haruyuki again. But all she accomplished was adding spin to their conjoined bodies. She might have gotten some pointers before the battle, but this was still her first experience in a totally gravity-free environment.

Of course, it was also Haruyuki's first time. But when he really thought about it, he'd experienced something similar any number of times—free fall from impossible altitudes. During a free fall, kicks and punches were mostly useless. The only effective attack was when the opponent was completely restrained.

"Please excuse me!" Apologizing automatically, Haruyuki slipped his arms around Suntan from behind before squeezing the slender torso with everything he had.

Since duel avatars didn't breathe or have blood flowing through them, choke holds worked totally differently from in the real world. To cause damage, an avatar needed to apply enough pressure to break the other player's armor, but Silver Crow didn't have that kind of strength.

"It's...no use! My armor cannot be crushed with this force!" Suntan shouted, removing her hands from Haruyuki's arm. And she was right; her armor was quite strong, as befitting her insect motif. He doubted he could put a tiny crack or two with a choke hold.

However, that was not his objective.

The instant his opponent turned her focus to escaping the hold, he loosened his arms and let them slip slightly to cross his forearms while still holding on to Suntan. At the same time, he pulled his head back as far as he could.

"Head..." Silver Crow's face mask shone with a pure-white glow, and the light of the stars receded. Suntan, desperate to escape Crow's arms, reacted the slightest bit too late. "...Buuuuuuuuutt!!"

Haruyuki smashed his head into the back of the head in front of him.

The Anomaly, Graphite Edge. The reason for the nickname was the fact that he was equipped with swords that could cut through anything and a shield that could defend against anything.

Although it wasn't exactly a shield, per se.

The longsword of Graph's right hand—named Lux—was matte black along the edge, while the blade itself was a transparent glass-like material. Thus, in poor light, it looked like it was nothing more than a thin black border. This edge was graphene, a sheet a single atom thick. Because the blade tip was only a single atom wide, it could cut through any substance in the Accelerated World. The blade itself was made of hyper diamond, a fullerene aggregate. Boasting an overwhelming hardness and fracture toughness, it *repelled* any substance in the Accelerated World.

It hadn't been drawn yet, but Graph had Umbra on his left shoulder, a longsword of the exact same appearance and performance. So then what would happen if sword was to cut sword—Lux against Umbra? Many Burst Linkers had questioned this for several years, but Graph merely grinned in response.

It had been three years since she'd fought Graphite Edge, formerly the earth of the Four Elements, and now the first seat of the Six Armors. And the stage for their last fight had been the roof of Shibuya Hikarie, the commercial building beside Ravine Square.

Back then, she had begrudgingly been defeated, unable to break the cross-guard defense of the two swords, but today she had to show him how she'd grown in the last three years. She couldn't fail in this mock territory battle, and most importantly, Graphite Edge had been Kuroyukihime's sword teacher.

"First, I'll have to make you draw your second sword, hmm?" Kuroyukihime said, guard up as she dropped into position.

"Looking forward to it." Graph grinned beneath his face mask—or so it seemed. "Been a long time since I drew Umbra."

"Hasn't it been a long time since you even dueled?" she retorted.

"Now that you mention it, I guess it has." His arrogant tone hadn't changed, but the tip of the longsword he gripped in his right hand was perfectly still even in the super-low gravity of the stage.

Facing him, Kuroyukihime quickly glanced around to check on the situation. She was standing on the left part of the floating island split apart by Graph's special attack. Silver Crow and Suntan Chafer had been fighting on that same island until a few seconds earlier, but Crow had jumped to send them flying off into the zero-gravity zone, so she couldn't see their battle at the moment.

Some ways off, Cyan Pile and Lime Bell were taking on green's Lignum Vitae and Ash Roller. Pile and Bell both excelled at close-range fighting, but in addition to the unfamiliar stage, they were

apparently bewitched by Lignum's parasol and the way it stretched and shrank and opened and closed. But they hadn't taken any significant damage yet.

On the other island, gradually drifting off to the right, Aqua Current was fighting Iron Pound, and Sky Raker was facing off against Viridian Decurion. The strategy appeared to place Ardor Maiden at the rear to shoot arrows while Current took Pound's strikes with her water armor, and Raker deftly handled Decurion's slashing attack, but without fire, the arrows didn't seem to be penetrating Pound's iron armor or Decurion's buckler.

Both teams were stuck in deadlocks, but once someone started the chain of special attacks, things would get moving. Kuroyukihime couldn't stand there glaring at Graphite Edge forever, either.

"I suppose we should get started, too, then, Graph?" Kuroyukihime raised the sword of her right hand, and Graphite Edge also readied himself in the same pose.

"Anytime you're ready, Lota."

"I'll say this now. Things won't go as they did three years ago!" she shouted, thrusting the tip of her right leg into the concrete before leaping forward.

In this kind of low-gravity environment, an avatar would normally be forced upward when they kicked off the ground to dash, but given that she could use both her feet as spikes, Black Lotus was the exception to this rule. She stuck to the ground in a low-altitude dash, slashing the sword of her right hand upward.

Graph easily caught the blow with his longsword. But she had been counting on that. Her aim lay elsewhere.

"Hup!" Graph barked as his body floated up lightly, unable to completely absorb the energy from the blow.

Not letting this chance slip away, she thrust her right foot into the ground as she lashed out again with her left. And once more, although he parried the blow, Graph rose farther upward.

The key to fighting with a sword in the Space stage was to use mainly sword strokes from a low position rather than the high position. With an attack from below, a sword wielder could get maximum power by bracing both legs on the ground, not to mention that the upward swing caused the defending opponent to float. And once away from the ground, there was no way for a sword user to counterattack.

Here we go! Shouting in her heart, Lotus dived directly beneath Graph, now two meters in the air. As she folded her legs under her and lowered her body, she turned her right arm straight upward and yanked it back.

"Death By Piercing!!" She called the technique's name with every

bit of strength she could muster, but her voice was drowned out by a sound like an external combustion engine.

A bluish-purple light brilliantly lit up the dark stage. She stretched her body upward as far as she could and thrust her sword arm straight up.

There were two courses of action Graphite Edge could take. Parry, or block with his sword. But Black Lotus's level-five special attack wasn't so weak that its trajectory could be changed with a normal attack when her opponent quite literally did not have his feet on the ground. And if he was going to block, even if the blow didn't shatter his hyper-diamond blade, Graph would fly up toward the distant stars. It would be perfect if they could defeat all the other green members while he was struggling to make his way back.

The tip of her Terminate Sword, glittering lethally, closed in on the chest of the dual swordsman. If the special attack of a king pierced a critical point, instant death was certain, no matter how high-ranking the player, and yet, Graph showed no sign of moving Lux.

No parry and no block? No matter. Be pierced!

"Oh!" Grunting, Kuroyukihime tried to break through the thin armor on Graph's chest.

Here, finally, the swordsman responded. But it wasn't his right hand that moved; it was his left. This empty hand, slender for an M-type, casually grabbed the tip of Kuroyukihime's sword.

The swords of her four limbs were the origin of the king's nickname, World's End, and they tore through everything they touched. The only exceptions were the Seven Arcs the kings had, the weapon of the successive Chrome Disasters, and Graphite Edge's double swords. Plus, Graph's duel avatar body had such little defensive power that Sky Raker had even remarked that Graph was more sword than person. Thus, the five fingers of Graph's left hand, holding on to the Black King's sword while a special attack was activated, should have dropped off instantly.

"Nngh?!" Kuroyukihime gasped in shock.

The powerful thrust of her special attack vanished, as though her sword had stabbed into a lump of thick rubber. From the gaps between Graph's fingers, the bluish-purple light scattered pointlessly. Not a single finger was cut off, and the health gauge displayed in the upper right of her field of view did not drop so much as a pixel.

On the verge of touching the chest armor, her sword lost all momentum and stopped.

"What on earth did you do?" Kuroyukihime murmured, staring up at this.

The answer was so nonchalant, it was almost hateful. "I'm the one who taught you the Way of the Flexible, Lota."

Kuroyukihime's blade still gripped in his left hand, Graphite Edge casually swung Lux. The jet-black single-atom blade touched the side of her ebony sword.

Ting! Kuroyukihime watched as the top fifteen centimeters of her right hand were severed.



The instant the Head Butt propelled forward and made contact with the back of Suntan Chafer's head, his full weight behind it, a pure-white light effect reflected brilliantly off the armor of both avatars. Although Suntan's armor boasted a strength on par with any metal color, cracks radiated outward, and tiny fragments flew off.

Head Butt, Silver Crow's sole hand-to-hand special attack, possessed the two characteristics of Physical/Striking and Energy/Light. The majority of the physical damage was checked by her thick armor, but the light damage became a directionless shock wave and penetrated down to the inner body of the avatar.

"Nngh!" Suntan groaned while her health gauge dropped nearly 20 percent. The knockback of the attack caused them to be blown a good distance away from each other, Suntan toward the sea of stars that colored the sky of the stage and Haruyuki down toward the floating island.

The sky of a normal duel stage had a boundary wall, so Suntan wouldn't fly up and off into the depths of space. But it would take a fair bit of time until she hit the wall and came bouncing back. He had to get back to the island before that and stand alongside Takumu and Chiyuri in the fierce fight against Lignum and Ash.

As he fell in a straight line in the zero-gravity space, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide to try to take in the status of the battle. He suddenly saw a vivid violet-blue flash of light illuminate one of the floating islands. The light of the Black King's special attack, Death By Piercing.

Narrowing his eyes, he saw Graphite Edge floating up off the ground and Kuroyukihime directly beneath him. If she launched her special attack from that position, even if he did manage to somehow block it, Graph would be repelled directly upward and shoot off toward the stars just like Suntan.

Nice, Kuroyukihime! Haruyuki clenched his fist in victory.

Then, instead of the light of the special attack piercing Graph like a lance, it scattered in all directions and disappeared. In the right side of Haruyuki's field of view where the health gauges of enemies and allies were displayed, Kuroyukihime's dropped more than 10 percent.

"Kuroyukihime!" Haruyuki shouted, perplexed by what had happened.

Most likely, Graph had somehow kept himself from being knocked backward by her attack and instead decided on an immediate counterattack. As was to be expected, this former Element and current

first seat of the Six Armors was no ordinary player.

Haruyuki thought about changing the target of his descent from Takumu and Chiyuri to the spot beside Kuroyukihime and gritted his teeth.

I'll take Graph. Kuroyukihime had made this declaration right before the start of the battle. On top of that, the Black King was far too good a player to ever be done in like this. He had to have faith and leave this to her. So Haruyuki took his eyes off Kuroyukihime and focused on the battlefield with Takumu and Chiyuri.

Pile Driver, the large Enhanced Armament equipped on Cyan Pile's right arm, was an effective weapon in the Space stage as well, as long as his feet were planted on the floating island. But the instant he went out into the zero-gravity sphere, the pile would lose essentially all its force. This was because, the instant he launched it, he would be unable to absorb the recoil, and his body would inevitably be pushed backward.

To avoid that situation, Takumu was moving very carefully to keep from accidentally floating up. But as a result of that, he was unable to get the lightweight Lignum Vitae within range of his weapon. Meanwhile, the parasol that was Lignum's main weapon was mesmerizing him, stretching and contracting, opening and closing, but it didn't seem to have enough power to pierce Cyan Pile's armor.

The other fight, Ash Roller vs. Lime Bell, was developing even more simply: Ash merely fled from her.

"Heeeey! Waaaaaiit!" Bell cried as she swung the striking weapon Choir Chime.

"Mighty me can't stop, won't stop!" Ash shouted. The rider himself had almost zero fighting power once he had descended from his American motorcycle, but he was quick on his feet, if nothing else. He bounced deftly along in the low-gravity environment, and Chiyuri couldn't get close to him.

Neither Lignum nor Ash appeared to have noticed yet that Haruyuki was closing in on them from above. He wondered which to surprise with an attack and then grimaced abruptly.

The fact that Lignum Vitae and Ash Roller had joined together in this fight was no random roll of the dice. They must have teamed up because of some synergistic effect, and yet, it looked like the two of them weren't doing anything other than running away. They might have been buying time, but the Change didn't happen in normal duel stages, and once a Battle Royale had started, it was impossible for reinforcements to jump into the fight.

Wait. I need to take them down instead of just worrying about stuff! Haruyuki set his sights on a surprise attack on Lignum, who was closer to his landing spot.

Abruptly, an intense light source appeared beyond the floating island off in the distance and painted the stage in monotone contrasts.

“Th-the sun?!” Haruyuki cried out unconsciously.

A girl’s voice from below drowned out his yelp. “Carbon Cycle!!”

As if Lignum Vitae had been waiting for this to abandon her defensive position against Takumu, she stopped moving and held her parasol up high. The Enhanced Armament rapidly grew in size to cover and hide Lignum.

Haruyuki didn’t know what kind of technique this was. But he couldn’t just stand by and let her do it. Bending his legs deeply and squatting to absorb the force of his landing, Haruyuki started running toward her as soon as his feet were on the ground. As if thinking the same thing, Takumu also closed the distance between them, readying his Pile Driver.

Lignum’s special attack was apparently of the transformation variety. The dress-clad torso stretched out into a thin cylinder, while her feet became one with the earth. Her parasol swelled up into a cone shape and swallowed her upper body. She was a tree. A large green tree, reaching a height of three meters.

“Yaaah!” Haruyuki launched a roundhouse kick to smash the thirty-centimeter-thick trunk.

On the opposite side, Takumu braced his feet and fired the Pile Driver.

Ka-clang!

Both Haruyuki and Takumu were both knocked backward and fell to the ground.

“N-no damage?!” Takumu cried, shocked, still on his backside. The torso/trunk of Lignum was not so much as scratched.

In the back of Haruyuki’s mind, Aqua Current’s words from before the start of the meeting floated to the surface.

Lignum Vitae, that’s the name of the wood that’s said to be the hardest in the world.

So then, did that mean Lignum had gone full defense and abandoned the idea of attacking? In that case, was she still trying to buy time now that she was a tree? This hypothesis of Haruyuki’s was quickly proven false.

A geometrical pattern that shone with a green light rose up on the surface of the canopy/parasol turned massive cone. The light flowed down the trunk toward the roots, just as a tree bathed in the light of the sun produced energy through photosynthesis. The light that collected at the roots focused into a single line and flowed across the ground to where Ash Roller was some ten meters away.

“Hey, hey, heeeeeeey!!” Ash stopped and shouted. “Here we go! Here we go! Giga-overflowiiiiing!! Sorry for the wait, you kids!! Now’s

where it all starts!! Mighty me! My tuuuuuurrrrrn!!”

Snap! He turned finger guns on Haruyuki and his friends. Chiyuri stopped, dumbfounded, and then started running as if coming back to herself, swinging the large bell.

“Your turn is never coming! You can just take a nap right there!” Chiyuri shouted.

“Howling Panhead!” Ash cried at nearly the same time.

Haruyuki remembered this special attack name. Flying Knucklehead was the one that fired the antiaircraft missiles from the launcher on Ash Roller’s motorcycle, and Howling Panhead launched the ground-to-ground missiles. But the motorcycle was sitting on the green camp island off in the distance; there was no way Ash could control it—

Wait. No.

“Bell! Run!” Haruyuki called before he’d gotten visual confirmation. And then he saw two points of light come flying from the north side of the stage at a ferocious speed. Large missiles with the first seeker lens shining red. Ash could launch the missile long-distance with just the technique call, even when he wasn’t riding the motorcycle.

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” Chiyuri put on the emergency brakes with both feet and spun around to try to head over to Haruyuki. But the speed of the missiles’ flight was approaching that of Silver Crow’s top flying speed. And given how difficult running was in the Space stage, she wouldn’t be able to make it with just her feet.

Takumu, about fifteen meters away, threw his upper body back forcefully and shouted, “Splash Stinger!!”

Cyan Pile’s chest armor opened up, and a myriad of tiny needle missiles were launched in quick succession. These scraped past Lignum Vitae in tree mode and closed in on Ash’s missiles from the left side.

The school of small missiles and the two larger ones crossed paths at basically the same time as Haruyuki threw himself forward to grab onto Chiyuri and yank her down to the ground.

A burst of red light—the sound of explosions. The floating island shook fiercely, and as he covered Chiyuri, Haruyuki felt an intense wave of heat and debris assaulting his armor. Although they’d managed to avoid a direct hit, his health gauge dropped before his eyes.

The damage was probably due to all of Takumu’s needle missiles exploding, too, but even so, this was quite the destructive power. If he’d taken even one hit, he would have sustained heavy damage, but fortunately, this technique of Ash’s used up a serious amount of his special-attack gauge. Haruyuki had to get close and take him down

before it recharged enough for a second shot.

He checked Ash's gauge among those lined up in the upper right of his field of view and opened his eyes wide in surprise. "Whoa?!"

Ash's special-attack gauge was replenishing before his eyes. Was he drinking something? No, no; there was nothing like that in the normal duel field. His mind racing, Haruyuki lifted his head and looked at Ash, but he was simply standing there on the edge of the floating island in an imperious pose; he wasn't smashing terrain objects or anything...

"It's Lignum, Crow!" Takumu shouted, and Haruyuki finally understood what was happening.

The line of light that connected Ash to the tree that was Lignum Vitae was there to charge his special-attack gauge. Lignum's transformation was not simply defensive. Most likely, she could generate energy just like photosynthesis when bathed in sunlight and share that with her comrades. In other words, Ash's missiles were now unlimited for all intents and purposes. *This* was the synergistic effect of the Lignum/Ash duo.

"You fiiiiiiiiinally figured it out, damned bird bunch!" the century-end rider shouted, a smile of satisfaction on his skull face. "And it's late o'clock! Mighty me's turn! Never ends, yoooooooo!! Howling Panhead!! One more time! Howling Panhead!! For luck, Howling Panheaaaaaaaaaad!!"

Whud, whud, whud, whud, whud, whud!! Six missiles were successively launched from the American motorcycle parked off in the distance.

Ardor Maiden aka Utai Shinomiya took a deep breath as she began to pull back the string of her longbow, Flame Caller. Particles of light enveloped her hands to become a long, thin straight line and make the lacquered vermilion arrow manifest.

Normally, the arrow would have been wrapped in bright-red flames, but in the Space stage where there was no oxygen, flames could not burn. The silver arrowhead shone sharply, but unfortunately, it could not break through the thick armor of Iron Pound nor the hard buckler of Viridian Decurion with simple piercing damage alone.

Nearly five minutes had passed already since Utai, Sky Raker, and Aqua Current had started to fight Pound and Decurion on one chunk of the floating island that had been split apart by Graphite Edge. The strategy was for Raker and Current to stand firm and handle the fierce attacks of the two green members, while Utai launched arrows from

the rear, but this was something they'd been forced into, rather than the optimal strategy. Now that Utai had lost the divine protection of flames, she wouldn't be able to endure close-range combat with "Fists" Pound or "Consul" Decurion. And since Utai couldn't approach the enemy, Raker (who was definitely not a close-range type herself) and Current were in there giving it their all.

She wondered if she might be more useful if she retreated to a different floating island farther off and tried a long-range attack from there. Of course, they were defending against pretty much all the arrows she launched at this close range, so unless she came up with some pretty serious tricks, she wouldn't be able to do any damage from a distance, either. Even so, Utai couldn't help thinking it would be better than simply standing there and letting the others protect her.

Her parent and real-life older brother, Mirror Masker/Kyoya Shinomiya, had sheltered Utai from a massive falling mirror and lost his life doing so. She had absolutely no desire to see anyone else get hurt protecting her. It was more painful than having her own body ripped into a thousand pieces.

But before this fight began, Sky Raker/Fuko Kurasaki had told her, "Get back, be patient, and keep shooting arrows. You'll definitely make it like that."

Having been teamed up with Raker ever since the days of the former Nega Nebulus, she trusted her implicitly, and she truly adored Fuko in the real world. But Utai found herself just the tiniest bit unnerved by the older girl. Because when it came down to it, Fuko would try to protect Utai. She would shower Utai with love and try to look after her. And that felt very, very good.

Maybe it was inevitable that Fuko would protect her. The fact was, though, the gap between their actual fighting abilities went far beyond the numbers of level seven and eight. It had been years since they last dueled each other, but if, hypothetically, she was to go up against Raker today, Raker would knock all the arrows Utai launched to the ground with the palm of her hand, close the distance between them in an instant, and defeat Utai before she had a chance to even fight back.

But someday.

Someday, she would reach the same heights as Raker and not simply be protected by her. Utai had started thinking she wanted to become a real partner since she joined the new Nega Nebulus—to be more precise, since she met Silver Crow/Haruyuki Arita.

To be honest, she'd thought he was a little unreliable at first. He didn't really look like the kind of Burst Linker that *the* Black King, Black Lotus, World's End, would choose for a child and entrust with the future of the Legion. But by the time Crow had rescued her from

Suzaku's altar, and they had returned from the Castle together, Utai, too, had come to understand what made him special.

Crow's strength was his very determination to reach distant heights. That strength of will, no matter how hopeless the situation—even if he was beaten a hundred times and made to crawl on the ground, he would grit his teeth and force himself to his feet to take on the hundred and first fight. Which was why he had been born with those beautiful silver wings, the lone duel avatar in the Accelerated World with the power of true flight.

Utai had learned from Silver Crow the importance of standing firm and moving forward in a crisis. Even in this situation, where she seemed to be nothing more than baggage, if she had faith in Raker and kept shooting her arrows, something would surely change.

Her beloved bow, Flame Caller, had the ability to generate arrows without limit, so unlike a gun-type Enhanced Armament, she could never run out of ammo, no matter how many she fired. She aimed the thirty-third arrow at Iron Pound and released the bowstring. The arrow whistled through the sky, despite the lack of air, nearly hit Pound's face just as she'd intended, but then it was blocked by his left glove. The arrow fell to one side without doing any damage and melted out of existence.

Not yet, she thought as she went to ready her next arrow.

"Nngh!" Decurion grunted sharply from his place fighting at Pound's right. He had failed to defend against a whiplike high-speed jet of water that shot out from Aqua Current's hand and took some damage, albeit minimal.

But why was Decurion off his rhythm? Utai had been aiming at Pound, and he had completely defended against the arrow...

She gasped with realization and quickly pulled back the arrow produced by the longbow. This time, she shot at Decurion. The Consul caught the arrow with his buckler again as he had up to that point, but at the same time, Pound failed to dodge Raker's sword hand and clicked his tongue. "*Tch!*"

"I see how it is," Utai murmured. She finally understood Sky Raker's intention. For the last five minutes, she had been launching her arrows at a fixed pace, but the target had been random. She'd switch between Pound and Decurion and then fire a few times in a row at one or the other. The cumulative effect was to produce hesitation and annoyance in the veteran warriors of Great Wall—"Which one of us will it be now?"

In which case.

Rather than suppressing her battle aura as she had been up to that point so they would not guess who she was aiming at, Utai poured it all into her bowstring. Her whole body frozen with the bow drawn

and aimed, she built up the fire of her battle will. Still not shooting. Not shooting. Not shooting...

Pound and Decurion glanced at Utai impatiently, and Sky Raker and Aqua Current did not let those openings slip away.

“Ha!”

“Hunh!”

Crying out at the same time, the two took a huge step forward, and Raker launched a palm strike from a low crawling position, while Current produced a water blade to deal ferocious attacks at their respective targets. The end goal of these “floating techniques” was marvelously accomplished, and Pound and Decurion were knocked upward simultaneously.

“Dammit!” Pound cursed and turned his fists toward the starry sky as he slipped out of the island’s field of gravity. He was likely intending to fire some special attack upward and return to the island with the recoil. But floating in the zero-gravity space, he was now the perfect target for Utai.

“Superluminal Stroke!!” Utai shouted, further drawing back the already taut bowstring.

Ardor Maiden’s level-seven special attack, the only one whose force was not lessened in this stage. She drew a light attribute arrow that specialized in range, speed, and piercing power. Unlike her fire attribute special attacks like Flame Torrent or Flame Vortex, there was no particular explosion effect, but if it pierced her enemy’s critical point, it could deal serious damage. But the accuracy compensation that the majority of her special attacks had did not work at all on this one, so if her heart wavered even slightly, the accuracy would diminish.

The nocked arrow was enveloped in a pure-white light. Her consciousness traveled down to her duel avatar’s fingertips, and the instant she felt the bow and arrow become even more a part of her—she released it.

A silent flash raced through space and was pulled into Iron Pound’s body.

As a phenomenon, that was it, but as Iron Pound raised his arms, his thick chest armor shattered outward from the center. The health gauge that had been at nearly 90 percent dropped rapidly through the yellow zone and into the red, finally stopping when he was down to only 20 percent. Because the light had pierced that avatar in an instant, his kinetic energy did not change, and Pound continued to float in place.

It wasn’t instant death, but for a high-level metal color, she’d been able to do more damage than she’d expected. Raker would strike the final blow for her later. With this thought in mind, Utai next turned

her bow toward Decurion.

“Pound! Fall back!” Decurion shouted, brandishing the Gladius dagger in his right hand.

Pound narrowed his eye lenses in vexation as he positioned his hands in front of himself. “Eruption Blow!”

Flames spewed from both gloves, and with the reactive force, Iron Pound flew off to the island to the rear. The enemy team didn’t have any means of recovering their health gauges, but even so, Sky Raker sank down to follow in pursuit. But she wasn’t allowed to strike the final blow.

“Viridian Legionnaire!” Decurion roared thunderously in midair, sword still raised.

Four bolts of green lightning jetted from the sword and struck the earth of the floating island one after another. Raker and Current leapt aside in time, so there was no damage. But this special attack of Decurion’s wasn’t a simple ranged attack.

“Here it comes,” Raker murmured as shadows oozed up from the ground where the lightning had hit. There were four soldiers clad in heavy armor, all a slightly lighter green than Decurion’s, carrying rectangular shields and rough lances.

Chocolat Puppeteer, a new member of Nega Nebulus who had just joined the other day from the Setagaya area, had the ability to produce automatons called Chocopets. Excellent soldiers with chocolate bodies impervious to physical attacks, they could understand a fairly high level of commands, but the Viridian Legionnaires that Consul Viridian Decurion summoned were on an entirely different level. He could call up four with one special-attack gauge, so if he repeated the technique, he could summon even eight at one time, which was terrifying.

Two of these green soldiers headed for Raker, the other two, Current, while Decurion, back on the floating island, lance in hand, kicked wordlessly off the ground and charged toward Utai.

* * *

On the left, the powerful shock wave of incoming missiles. On the right, the heroic footfalls of Legionnaires. Kuroyukihime keenly felt the struggle of her comrades. But she didn’t have the freedom to concern herself with that now.

Her right hand’s sword tip was gone, so she could no longer execute thrusting attacks. The swordsman who had dealt this damage still had not drawn his second sword and remained casually cool up against her.

Black Lotus, however, was reeling from the shock of the M-type

avatar catching her Death By Piercing, a special attack that had pierced countless powerful enemies up to that point. It had indeed been Graph who had taught her the Way of the Flexible, or as Silver Crow put it, Guard Reversal, but rendering a piercing special attack powerless with one hand was a total aberration.

“Don’t look so serious, Lota,” Graph drawled, seeing through to Kuroyukihime’s heart. “It’s only because gravity’s so weak that I could stop your DBP without taking damage. It’s like your avatar’s made of Styrofoam, basically.”

“Don’t abbreviate my technique name,” she replied curtly, trying to switch mental gears. Just as he said, if there was no gravity, then her body would also be lighter, and the force of her attack would no longer be completely transmitted. So then, why had he been able to cut her sword? Because he’d fixed in place the tip of her sword with the hand that caught her special attack.

The key to close-range combat in the Space stage was to fix yourself firmly on something with mass. She had thought that had been what she was doing, but it wasn’t enough. If she didn’t also fix her opponent in place, she wouldn’t be able to have any impact on a master player like Graph.

But given that all her limbs were swords, Black Lotus couldn’t use any grabbing techniques. She could have one of her comrades grab hold of him for her, but mentally, that would be the same as defeat. If she was going to cut Graph down using her own power, then there was only one option. He had probably already read her mind on that one, too, though. If she aimed blindly, she would just be hit with a painful counterattack. She needed to carefully lay out a strategy that led to that checkmate.

You were always good at this, Haruyuki, she spoke to her scion in her heart, and the pressure eased just the slightest bit.

It was true: She couldn’t lose this mock Territory battle. If they didn’t win and get Shibuya back, the decisive battle with the White King would fade into the distance. During that time, Cosmos would use her latest Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, to wreak some new havoc on the Accelerated World.

What on earth did this girl, her real-life sister, want? What was she fighting for? Kuroyukihime still didn’t know. But as Kuroyukihime’s parent, she had given her Brain Burst. She had manipulated Kuroyukihime with false information and made her drive Red Rider to total point loss. Behind the scenes, against the backdrop of the mutual nonaggression pact among the six major Legions, she had formed the Acceleration Research Society and brought about a number of chaotic situations using backdoor programs, remote farming, and the ISS kits. She had abducted Niko and created the

Mark II. All these were the process to realize some single objective.

Kuroyukihime would find out what this hidden objective was when she defeated White Cosmos and forced her to talk at sword point. She couldn't lose to Graph there. But Haruyuki Arita had taught her that just seeing the objective ahead didn't make a battle worth fighting. She needed to muster her full power in this duel.

...And have fun.

"That's right, Haruyuki," Kuroyukihime murmured the thought to Silver Crow, fighting hard in the battlefield to the left, before taking a deep breath and letting it out.

"Overdrive. Mode Blue." She voiced the command almost in a whisper, and a blue light rose up in the grooves along her body. She abandoned armor strength and technique range to specialize her avatar in close-combat attacks.

Graph's aura also changed the instant he saw her transformation. More precisely, anything like an aura disappeared completely, and any sense of his internal being was gone. The swordsman moved his left arm languidly, and he had no sooner grabbed the hilt of Umbra above his shoulder than he had smoothly drawn it.

Crouching, Kuroyukihime squared off against the Anomaly, now finally equipped with both swords. She had 80 percent left in her health gauge, while Graph's was practically full. As for their special-attack gauges, Kuroyukihime was at 60 percent, while Graph was at 70. Both of his gauges were greater than hers, but at this level, they could flip back and forth any number of times; that was the Brain Burst duel.

Kuroyukihime readied the sword of her broken right hand to the front and her intact left to the rear. Graph mirrored her, taking on the same stance. The rapidly increasing pressure was on the verge of cracking the earth at her feet, but she accepted even that.

Enjoy—no, delight. I never thought I would get the chance to cross swords with this master again, and now here we are facing each other. I'll show him how far I've come. I'll show him the power I refined while we were apart.

Beneath her goggles, Kuroyukihime smiled unconsciously. Sound disappeared, pressure disappeared, fear disappeared. In that moment, Kuroyukihime moved.

The six large missiles, an impossible triple launch of Howling Panhead, closed in on Haruyuki and his friends, seeker lenses glittering violently.

"Nngh! One more time!" Takumu threw his upper body back

again and moved to trigger his special attack, but Haruyuki hurried to stop him.

“Wait, Pile. It probably won’t be enough!”

The previous Splash Stinger had just barely managed to take down the previous two large missiles. With the late start, it would be impossible for Takumu to make all six of the missiles flying toward them explode. And as long as he was hooked up to Lignum Vitae, Ash Roller could simply launch more, as many as he wanted.

What were those missiles using to lock onto Haruyuki and his friends anyway? It wasn’t heat. Duel avatars had no body temperature, and if that was their homing device, the rear missile would lock onto the missile before it.

Was it simply that they locked onto an “enemy avatar”? No, that might have been possible during the Territories or a tag-team match, but the rules of this duel followed Battle Royale. System-wise, everyone except yourself was an enemy, so the missiles would attack Lignum.

At the very least, the fact that they had lenses meant they had to be looking at something. Not infrared light, but visible light images. And if they were identifying enemies and allies, then an external guidance? Which meant...Ash Roller’s gaze!

Haruyuki yanked his head up and locked eyes with the skull rider staring at them from the edge of the floating island.

There was no mistake.

Which meant he just had to make sure that gaze didn’t reach them. “Pile! The ground!”

With just these words, Takumu seemed to guess at Haruyuki’s intent. They would be leaving it to chance, but there was no longer any other way. Takumu nodded and turned the Pile Driver of his right hand toward his feet, shouting, “Spiral Gravity Driver!!”

The enlarged Enhanced Armament shot a high-speed spinning hammer drill slamming into the concrete. This technique had the restraint that it could only be fired perpendicular to the stage, but it had enough force to destroy even Octahedreal Isolation, the imprisoning space Black Vise generated. And because of the flames that jetted from the rear of the Pile Driver, Takumu wouldn’t float away after using it.

The steel-hammer drill plunged deep into the floating island, and the left half on which Haruyuki and his comrades stood broke into countless fragments and shattered. The local gravity disappeared completely, and the lumps of concrete drifted aimlessly.

“Aaah!” Chiyuri shrieked, and Haruyuki grabbed her hand.

The missiles were speeding toward them, but Ash Roller’s gaze was blocked by countless obstacles, and one after another, they

crashed into the concrete and exploded.

“Ngh!” Haruyuki tried to figure out their next move as he shielded Chiyuri from the heat and small fragments pressing in on them.

Still in tree mode, Lignum Vitae had her feet caught in a chunk of stone three meters across, so she couldn’t move and instead elected to continue photosynthesis. Ash clung to this rocky lump, cursing violently, but it seemed that his special-attack gauge was still being charged. They’d be targeted by his missiles once again if they flew carelessly out of the asteroid belt. But if they stayed hidden forever, Suntan Chafer might come back after Haruyuki had gone to all the trouble of sending her flying off to the end of the sky.

“Taku, Chiyu.” Haruyuki leaned in toward his childhood friends behind a large lump of concrete and communicated the strategy quietly.

They seemed a bit hesitant, but they trusted him implicitly and nodded their agreement before taking position as Haruyuki had instructed. The three nodded at one another once more before Haruyuki kicked at a nearby rock and came out from behind the obstructing curtain.

“Go!” he shouted the instant he caught sight of Ash.

Takumu, directly behind him, fired his Pile Driver, and Haruyuki caught the launched pile with the sole of his right foot. Using the Way of the Flexible, he bent his leg and turned the attack power into propulsive force.

However, unable to completely absorb the force of the pile in the zero-gravity environment, he felt the armor on the bottom of his foot crack. But it didn’t go so far as to penetrate, and Silver Crow became a silver bullet, charging through space.

“Giga-fooooooooool!! A banzai attack like that’ll never defeat mighty me now that I’m infinityyyyyy!!” Ash Roller cried, still clinging to the rock up ahead. He snapped the fingers of his left hand out at Haruyuki, about to fire his missiles again.

“Citron Callllllllll!!” Chiyuri shouted, and a beam of yellow-green light gushed up from behind Haruyuki to envelop Ash’s entire body.

“Whoa!” Ash howled as his special-attack gauge dropped before his eyes. His once-fully-charged gauge was being reversed by Lime Bell’s Citron Call Mode I, which wound back the status of the target avatar in increments of seconds.

“H-H-Howling Panhead!!” Ash frantically shouted the technique name, but his gauge had already dropped below the required amount, and the motorcycle, on standby off in the distance, didn’t so much as sigh. Of course, once Chiyuri’s special attack ended, the gauge would be filled up once again by Lignum’s ability, but as long as it bought

Haruyuki a few seconds to get closer, it was enough.

“Hngaaaaaaaah!” Haruyuki beat down on Ash’s chest with a flying cross chop. The kinetic energy generated by Cyan Pile’s Pile Driver was transmitted as if the two avatars were billiard balls, and the larger one—Ash—shrieked.

“I’ll be baaaaaaack!” And he flew off into the distant darkness.

“*No need to hurry!*” Haruyuki called in his mind, grabbing onto the rock Ash had been clinging to only a second earlier. He’d anticipated this, but the line of light that spilled from Lignum also poured into Haruyuki’s body and started to replenish his health gauge.

After a few seconds, Lignum appeared to notice the energy thief. “Krebs Cycle!” she shouted, an attempt to cancel tree mode. The conical canopy became a parasol again, and the trunk took on the lines of a girl once more.

Perhaps if he was the hero in an anime or a manga or a Burst Linker who followed the way of the gentleman, he would have made a vow not to attack an enemy in the middle of transforming. But Haruyuki, still just level six, didn’t have that luxury against a high ranker.

“.....!”

Not wasting any time, he kicked off the stone. Aiming for the instant that the tree roots of Lignum’s feet turned back into slender heels, he quickly used up the special-attack gauge he had stolen. “Head Buuuuuutt!!”

Lignum, hands still holding the parasol high above her head, was unable to get her guard up in time and took Haruyuki’s Head Butt to the chest. But even if she had guarded, the result would have been the same.

“I *will* be back.” The fourth seat of the Six Armors flew off in a different direction from Ash.

Haruyuki immediately looked up at the sky, but he still saw no sign of Suntan.

And with that, the three opponents Kuroyukihime had instructed them to engage were dispatched for the time being. If they could add their strength to the other battlefields in the time they’d bought, the fight would tilt heavily in Nega Nebulus’s favor.



“Kuroyukihime!” Haruyuki stared hard at the floating island where Kuroyukihime and Graphite Edge were waging war.

An intense chill shot up his spine. Anticipation. Fear. Dread...

The certainty that he'd made an oversight he could never make up for.

On top of the three meters of rock, he looked back as if compelled and saw a cross-shaped silhouette approaching rapidly, pulling at him like a massive planet.

* * *

“Maiden!” Fuko cried in dread.

Back in the old Legion days, Utai would fly into the enemy camp in Fuko's arms and be dropped onto the enemy base like a bomb. But thinking about it now, she couldn't remember ever dying because of this strategy. After Utai burned the area to the ground with her ranged techniques, Fuko always swept in to protect her from the enemy counterattack.

In the present moment as well, Fuko was moving to protect her from Decurion's powerful attack. Utai could see her turning her back to the two Legionnaires marching her way, aiming instead for her directly.

But Utai couldn't let Fuko spoil her forever. If she couldn't stand tall and call herself the fire of the Four Elements eventually, she'd never be able to move forward.

“I'm okay!!” she called, mustering up all her willpower and drawing her longbow.

There was no way the long-distance-type Ardor Maiden could win in hand-to-hand combat against the close-range Viridian Decurion, so before he got close enough to swing his sword, she needed to check him in his place. All she had to rely on was the special attack that had pushed back Iron Pound, Superluminal Stroke. Sink or swim, she would aim for the avatar's critical point.

Except...that wouldn't work.

There was no way a sink-or-swim approach would work on a high-ranking opponent. However, at a time like this, she imagined Silver Crow would certainly not give in to despair, but rather try to find a way out.

Swallowing her fear, Utai drew Decurion in as far as she could. Just when Gladius was within striking distance, she bent her knees deeply and kicked off the ground with everything she had.

“Yaah!” Her lightweight avatar pulled away from the gravity of the floating island in the blink of an eye, and she ascended toward the

starry sky.

“You’re not getting away!” Decurion shouted, jumping after her—until he groaned, suddenly understanding his error.

They flew essentially straight up, a mere four meters between them.

Decurion couldn’t approach Utai as long as inertia propelled them forward. He couldn’t even change his trajectory to return to the floating island.

Most likely, if Utai had jumped even a second earlier, Decurion would have guessed at her aim. But because he’d already dropped into his slashing posture, he’d matched her rhythm.

Decurion probably also had a special attack of the type that could generate kinetic energy. But he’d only just generated the four Legionnaires, so his gauge had to be empty. She needed to take this chance to deal as much damage as possible.

As she moved toward the brilliantly colored stars, Utai drew her longbow. Naturally, Decurion moved his buckler to try to defend. But it was impossible to cover his entire body with a shield only forty centimeters across—and there were only four meters between them.

Fwng! Her arrow plunged deep into the gap in the armor covering Decurion’s right foot. The drop in his health gauge was about 5 percent, but the direct hit to an extremity gave Decurion angular momentum, and he started to spin on the perpendicular. Newton’s third law of motion ensured that Utai was also pushed backward when she fired the arrow, and the pair pulled away from each other bit by bit.

“Nngh!” Decurion moved his limbs, seemingly in a panic, but stopping the spinning once it had started was not possible in space. He soon gave up and curled into a ball, trying to protect himself by covering his body as much as possible with the round shield, but his back was virtually defenseless.

Taking a deep breath, Utai drew her bowstring once more. Carefully applying the right amount of pressure, she focused on one spot and fired.

Snap! The arrow pierced the long armor plate stretching down from Decurion’s chest. There was no avatar body beneath, so this didn’t bring about any extra damage, but Utai had her eye on something else. With the addition of spin in the opposite direction, Decurion’s vertical rotation stopped just as his back was turned toward Utai.

“Heeaaaaaah!!” With an unusually fierce battle cry, Utai made the string of her beloved bow sing. The arrows launched in succession half a second apart and pierced Decurion’s back one after the other.

“Hnnngaaaah!!” Decurion tucked in his arms in an attempt to turn

his body around, but he had nothing that could defend against the onslaught of Utai's arrows. They turned the thin armor of his back into a pincushion in the blink of an eye, and Decurion's health gauge dropped rapidly while both of their special-attack gauges increased dramatically.

The instant hers moved above 50 percent, Utai pulled her bowstring back with extra force and shouted, "Superluminal Stroke!!"

White light flashed between her hands. Her unhesitating arrow shone so brightly that it made the stars themselves seem dull.

Shpak! By the time the sound of impact reached her ears, the arrow of light had already pierced Decurion's back. Just as with Pound, it didn't fell him in one blow, but his health gauge was colored bright red, and he dropped toward the floating island, arms and legs splayed. Meanwhile, hit with unprecedented recoil, Utai was pushed up toward the infinite sky. With this momentum, she wouldn't be able to return until she hit the wall of the stage. She would have to leave the rest to Fuko and Akira.

And then she saw it: a blue light glittering on the island far below her.

A light she'd witnessed any number of times before—the flames of Gale Thruster, the sole Enhanced Armament in the Accelerated World for use in space.

"Fuu," Utai murmured nostalgically.

A silhouette ascended at incredible speed from the island. It was none other than Strong Arm, Sky Raker, flying with her left arm tucked up alongside her body and her right fist thrust ahead of her.

"So it's come to thiiiiis!!" The falling Decurion thundered and brandished his Gladius. He was planning to strike at the rapidly approaching Raker.

The sword was tinged with green sparks. Decurion looked for the right timing and called the technique name, "Viridius—"

But the technique did not activate. Raker's overwhelming speed would not even permit him to call out its second half.

The vertical ascent of the comet that was Sky Raker slammed into Decurion. Raker's fist pierced the hole that Utai's special attack had opened up in his chest armor from the opposite side. His health gauge vanished instantly, and the second seat of the Six Armors broke into countless emerald fragments and exploded outward.

Having landed the first win in this Battle Royale, Sky Raker did not pose victoriously, but rather continued to ascend and closed in on Utai.

"Maiden!" she shouted, reaching out her hands to catch hold of Utai's avatar and hug her to her chest.

I was saved once again, Utai murmured in her heart, but she wasn't

upset about it. She felt like she'd done everything she could as a red long-distance type.

"Fuu." Utai said her name again and wrapped her arm about Fuko's. Or she was about to, at least, when they were suddenly assaulted with a fierce sideways G, and she groaned sharply.

Raker turned at a sharp angle and spoke to Utai with alarm in her voice. "Maiden, it's not over yet!"

"Wh-what happened?!"

"We were hit...That whole watching-from-the-sidelines thing, that wasn't about lenience. It was a strategy."

"What do you mean?" Utai asked.

"Grandé!!" Raker shouted, forcing her boosters into overdrive as she flew straight toward the opposite side of the battlefield.

* * *

In Brain Burst, players could control their avatars just as they did their real-life bodies, so naturally, your dominant arm in real life was the dominant arm of your avatar. Kuroyukihime, like the vast majority of Burst Linkers, was right-handed. Apparently, up until twenty or so years ago, some parents would correct their children if they were left-handed, but subsequent brain research found that forcibly correcting the dominant hand impeded development, so that sort of thing had since stopped.

All of the members of the current Nega Nebulus were right-handed, but there had been a few southpaws in the old Legion. And just one member was ambidextrous. That had been the Anomaly, freely wielding two swords, Graphite Edge.

And now, the Anomaly was not so much as taking a step, even as Kuroyukihime closed the distance between them with a full-powered dash. Lux in his right hand and Umbra in his left, his blades hung loosely at his sides; his gaze sat blocked by his dark goggles, so she couldn't tell where he was looking.

But this relaxed, natural state was itself Graph's Way of the Flexible warm-up movement. He would absorb any and all attacks with minimal movement, reverse the vector, and beat his opponent back. There was even a story—almost a legend—about how in a fight with the first Red King, the Master Gunsmith, Red Rider, he had caught every single bullet fired from those two guns and sent them back to their owner.

If Kuroyukihime slashed at him lazily, he would lightly brush the attempts aside and immediately deal her a painful counterattack. She first needed to make him pull out his double-sword cross guard, his most powerful defensive technique and one he only used when the

Way of the Flexible couldn't be applied.

"Yaaaaah!!" She crossed the swords of her arms and raised them high. It was a special motion, but it wasn't a special attack. Even if she slashed down with both arms at the same time, she wouldn't be able to produce much more force than an attack with one arm. With Graph's abilities, he wouldn't have to use the Way of the Flexible; he could have simply guarded with one sword and countered with the other to do serious damage.

But the Mode Blue effect light in Black Lotus's arms dulled his instincts. No doubt judging that this was a new ability or special attack she had learned in the last three years, Graph brought his crossed swords above his head and took on a defensive posture.

In their exchange back then, Kuroyukihime had lost, unable to break this cross guard. Now she feinted to break this absolute defensive technique, which was perhaps even on par with the Strife, the Green King's Arc.

"Hyaah!!" She launched her right leg in a forward kick with no warning. With both swords up, Graph's sides were totally open, and the sharp tip of her sword dived in. If her aim was straight, she would no doubt plunge through to his back.

"What—?!" Graph whirled the swords crossed in front of his face to his sides with an impossible speed.

Shnnk! The tips of Lux and Umbra just barely stopped Kuroyukihime's right leg, like a pair of scissors swinging down.

The number of things in the Accelerated World that could be caught between Graphite Edge's two swords—and not severed—could be counted on one hand. Kuroyukihime's limbs were not on that list.

Accompanied by her sharp and fleeting shriek, the sword of her right leg was cut off below the knee. Her health gauge dropped dramatically, plunging all at once to 50 percent.

But she had expected all this.

Kuroyukihime didn't stop moving for a second, even with her right leg amputated. Instead, she wrapped both arms around Graphite Edge, including his swords.

This technique was one she had not used on him before, and because his wrists had turned the dual swords inward, they had reached the limit of their range of motion. It would be impossible for him to immediately counter.

Not letting the opportunity slip away, Kuroyukihime shouted, "Death By Embracing!!"

Black Lotus's level-eight special attack. The range: a mere seventy centimeters. But whatever her arms embraced was severed.

An intense violet-blue light gushed from the Terminate Swords with Graph and his swords in their fatal grip.

Kssshk! Her arms crossed, and Graphite Edge was cut in two.

Or at least, he should have been.

But instead of the usual sound of crystal shattering, she heard an abnormal metallic sound that rubbed her nerves the wrong way. Her closing arms had been stopped midway.

As the light died down, Kuroyukihime opened her eye lenses wide. The swords of Black Lotus's hands had dug halfway into the blades of Graph's Lux and Umbra and then stopped. Pale sparks gushed from the place where smoky quartz and hyper diamond met, and she couldn't tell which was cutting into which—or if they were both taking on the same amount of damage.

"Ngh!" Kuroyukihime tried to open her arms to counter. But no matter how she pulled, her arms were not freed from Graph's swords.

"Ah, what the...?" Graph let out a dumbfounded cry as he also tried to pull his swords away, but the four blades, intertwined like a disentanglement puzzle, only creaked faintly.

““ ””

Former teacher and student stared at each other wordlessly.

"This is an idiotic situation." The first to break the silence was Kuroyukihime. "But if I simply hold you down here, it's my victory. My comrades will take care of the rest of the fight."

"Looks like you're bringing up some good young players, Lota," Graph replied, the aura of a grin bleeding through. "But it's about to be do-or-die, you know?"

"What?" Kuroyukihime narrowed her eye lenses below her goggles and then immediately opened them wide.

In the infinite starry sky unfolding behind Graph, a single shadow was flying in from the distance, emitting an overwhelming sense of pressure, extremely thick armor, and a cross-shaped shield equipped on his left arm. Invulnerable, Green Grandé.

The Green King's aim was not the central floating island where Kuroyukihime and Graph were fighting. It was the asteroid to the left where Silver Crow and the others were duking it out.

Haruyuki!! Crying out in her heart, Kuroyukihime tried once more to swing her arms free. But the enmeshed swords didn't so much as twitch, almost as if they had been welded together.

In contrast, Graph fixed his swords in place as though he were actually trying to keep Kuroyukihime from moving. "Surely you didn't think G was going to sit and watch right to the end, did you, Lota? That old man's fighting style is to wait and wait and wait and wait until *the* moment. Always has been."

"Oh-ho, looking forward to this, then," Kuroyukihime snapped, pushing back her panic.

"Huh? But you can't move, and even if you could, the rule is you

can't engage directly with G, yeah?"

"Not me. We also have someone who decides when *the* moment comes," Kuroyukihime replied, sending her thoughts out to the subordinate she trusted so deeply.

I'm counting on you, Raker!

This is when he decides to come at us?! Haruyuki was frozen in place, unable to figure out what to do, as he stared at the Green King closing in with ferocious speed.

He'd been about to breathe a sigh of relief with the knowledge that the black team had somehow come out on top after they knocked Lignum Vitae and Ash Roller to the distant edge of the stage. And now he had this attack to worry about.

And it wasn't just that. The very fact of Grandé's existence had completely slipped Haruyuki's mind, and likely Chiyuri's and Takumu's as well. After creating that foothold for the green team at the start of the battle, Grandé had been silent, so Haruyuki had been convinced he was going to just stand and watch the rest of the fight play out.

That had been the green team's strategy: erase the presence of their king, their most powerful member. By tossing in this potent bomb to catch the black team totally off guard, they could wreak maximum havoc.

Haruyuki could guess at the enemy's objective, but that didn't mean he thought up anything in the way of a counterstrategy. He simply stared at the approaching king.

The first to recover from the shock-induced stupor was Takumu. "Push him back!" he growled, bracing against the biggest rock in the area to ready his Pile Driver.

Takumu was right: Their best and last chance to attack the Green King was at that moment, when inertia was propelling him through the zero-gravity space. Even if he defended, the impact of their blows would still push him back into the distance.

"Do it!" Haruyuki cried.

"Go!" Chiyuri yelled.

Takumu nodded, carefully set his aim, and called the name of the technique. "Lightning Cyan Spike!!"

Cyan Pile's level-four special attack turned the pile to plasma before launching it into the air at high speed. The jet of white-hot energy shone with a pale light and became a giant lance shooting forward.

The Green King casually moved his great shield, the Strife, and

the plasma lance hit the cross dead center before swelling outward into a sphere.

Unsurprisingly, even a special attack couldn't break through the Arc. But it should have at least been able to stop Grandé's forward momentum. They would use that opportunity to think of some counterstrategy...

".....What?!"

Just when they'd started moving again, Haruyuki's thoughts were interrupted once more.

The plasma did not explode when it made contact with Grandé's cross-shaped shield. It stayed in a sphere, shuddering, almost as if it were caught in some kind of field.

An icy chill took hold of Haruyuki. He remembered what Kuroyukihime had once said to him: "The shield takes in any attack and counters with double the power."

"Pile! Run!!" Haruyuki shrieked.

But he was too late.

Zrsssh! The plasma transformed back into a lance of light twice as thick as the original Lightning Spike and shot forward. The jet of pale energy traced the same trajectory back and plunged into Cyan Pile's Pile Driver.

"Nngh!" Takumu's right arm from the shoulder down evaporated instantly, taking with it more than half the massive rock behind him.

"Pile!" Chiyuri cried in dismay, leaping over to catch Takumu as he started to drift backward.

"Bell, heal Pile!" Haruyuki shouted, then turned back to Grandé. Although the king had decelerated the slightest bit, he was still steadily approaching.

He hadn't remembered what he'd been taught about the special abilities of the Strife partially because Grandé's sudden entry into the fray had dumbfounded him, and that was Haruyuki's mistake. He could reflect on his mistakes all he wanted later, though. Right now, he had to get out of this tight spot.

Once again, Kuroyukihime's words echoed in his mind: "...The only way to break the defensive barrier of that shield is to get rid of it in a single super, superpowerful blow, or to create gaps through endless, successive attacks and aim for the main body of the avatar."

The former was impossible for Haruyuki. But the latter, maybe. After all, he was standing on this asteroid, so there was nowhere to run from Grandé.

"Go!!" he chided himself, kicking off the rock behind him with all his might. Flying in a straight line in the zero-gravity environment, he clenched his right hand. Grandé's massive body drew closer with every breath.

“Unh...Aaaaaaaah!!” With a fierce cry, he pushed away the pressure field surrounding the king and threw his fist into the center of his shield.

Wrist to shoulder, his joints creaked from the too-heavy feedback, as though he had punched the ground of Demon City. But if he stopped attacking now, he would only take the force of that punch times two. So he executed a left kick using the reactive force. Another right straight. And then a left hook. Punch. Kick. Punch. Kick.

Every time he landed a blow, the silver glow on the emerald surface of the shield grew, most likely the accumulated energy of Haruyuki’s physical attacks. If his pace lagged for even a millisecond, this energy would double in size and bounce back to smash Silver Crow to pieces.

It was weird that all his punching and kicking didn’t knock his avatar backward in the zero-gravity space, but he could feel some kind of strange magnetism. Judging from how Takumu’s plasma energy also accumulated on its surface, the Strife most likely generated a weak absorption field when defending.

“Unh— Aaaaaaah!!” Haruyuki mustered up all his speed and rotated his striking techniques. If even a single blow missed the core of the shield, he would lose his balance and momentum, breaking the chain of physical strikes. He needed to keep going with maximum speed and maximum precision.

Pushing his powers of concentration to the limit, Haruyuki remembered the time he had fought Grandé a month earlier. The place had been the roof of the Roppongi Hills Tower in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Equipped with the Armor of Catastrophe, Haruyuki had become the sixth Chrome Disaster and had swung his greatsword to strike the Strife.

That had been what Kuroyukihime called the “single superpowerful blow.” And although he hadn’t been able to knock Grandé’s shield back with that blow, he hadn’t lost to the shield, either, and as a result, the force of reaction had been dispersed downward, completely destroying the top of the Hills Tower.

Haruyuki currently did not have the force he possessed at that time. Back then, he’d been able to get a draw with Grandé thanks to the power produced by the Enhanced Armament the Chrome Disaster, the attack force of the cursed greatsword Star Caster, and the Beast, an artificial intelligence that lived in the armor. The difference in their actual abilities at present was essentially heaven and earth, but as long as Grandé kept taking his blows, Haruyuki would keep piling them on.

The wave of hyper-acceleration that only visited him when his powers of concentration crossed a certain line pushed up and

enveloped him. All sound faded, and the color of his field of view changed. All that existed in the world were the cross-shaped shield before him and his own fists and feet.

Faster. Faster.

The interval between his strike shortened ever further, and the sound of successive impacts was like a machine gun firing nonstop. The accumulated silver energy grew and grew and grew until finally the shield itself began to shine.

Faster, faster. Faster, faster, faster!!

Haruyuki made his duel avatar dance, the interval between blows as short as humanly possible. As long as he was in this zone, he felt like he could keep going forever.

Breaking this concentration was a shout from directly above. "That's enough, Crow!"

He knew who it was without looking. Suntan Chafer, sent flying to the boundary wall in the upper sky in the early stages of the Battle Royale, had returned. And she wasn't alone.

"I'm coming, Boss!" Iron Pound shouted.

"I'm baaaaaack, baby!" Ash Roller cried gleefully.

It seemed they had also returned from the distant edge of the stage.

If all three green members got in his way, Haruyuki wouldn't be able to keep pummeling the Green King. And the instant his fists stopped moving, the physical energy stored in that shield would be returned twofold. No matter how much of a metal color he was, Haruyuki would definitely be shattered into tiny pieces with that kind of impact.

What am I going to do? What should I do?

There's no "should" here. Just keep going to the very last second!

"Unaaaaaaaah!!" Mustering up every scrap of energy left to him, Haruyuki accelerated his onslaught even further. His hands and feet groaned, moving so fast he could only see them in freeze-frame, and the joints of his overloaded avatar were red-hot. He didn't know how many blows he'd landed so far, but the Strife was a massive rock in his way, not so much as even twitching.

He'd looked up the English word *strife* in the dictionary once and discovered it meant conflict. So then, what *was* conflict? How was it different from a contest? So he looked *that* up and learned that *contest* meant fighting an opponent to complete an objective, while *strife* was conflict born from one side refuting the ideals of the other.

At the time, he'd felt that strife was not a great name for a shield meant to protect a person. But he understood now, having experienced its special power of returning a hit twofold. Reject any and all attacks, reflect, destroy. There was no ability that more purely

manifested this concept of “refusal.”

Refusal. When he thought about it, Green Grandé himself had fought to refute the Brain Burst 2039 system. By hunting Enemies solo in the Unlimited Neutral Field and freely sharing the vast sums of points he earned with middle-rank Burst Linkers, he was rejecting the end of the world.

Grandé had explained his reasons for doing this before. Most likely, Brain Burst 2039 possessed whatever element that was missing from the already abandoned Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040. The world could not be allowed to close until that element was made manifest.

Haruyuki still didn’t entirely understand what Grandé had meant by this. But one thing was certain: Grandé’s will was rock-solid, and now he was standing in Haruyuki’s way. In which case, Haruyuki too had to prove his own will right until the very last moment. Even if he was attacked by Suntan and the others, even if the twofold energy was activated and smashed his avatar to pieces, he could not give up before the moment that happened.

Sparks shooting from every red-hot joint of his body, Haruyuki pushed ahead with his final onslaught. And then he heard it—

Corvus, fight just a little longer!!

He didn’t know if it was a voice or just a thought. But Haruyuki flicked his eyes up to the right for a mere instant while his fists and feet were on full rotation and saw it.

A blue comet flying against a dark-purple gas nebula. A red shooting star in the comet’s arms. “ICBM” Sky Raker and “Testarossa” Ardor Maiden.

“Flame Torrent!!” Maiden shouted as she drew her bow, hanging in the arms of Raker and hurtling through the sky.

The arrow she launched was not shrouded in flames. But the special attack itself was activated, and instantly, the arrow split into dozens of arrows to become a silver rain and pour down on the battlefield.

“Nngh!” Suntan raised her arms and took a defensive posture as Utai closed in from above, and Pound and Ash, coming in from behind Grandé, did the same.

Ka-lak-lak-lak-lak-lak! The arrows clanged against armor.

Haruyuki was also caught in the range of the special attack, but any arrows that might have fallen onto him were deflected by Suntan overhead and the great shield before him. Although Suntan, Pound, and Ash took direct hits from any number of arrows, their health gauges did not decrease in any significant way, and Grandé took no damage whatsoever, despite the fact that he took no defensive action at all.

But the aim of Maiden's special attack was not damage. In the instant of quiet generated by the rain of arrows, Sky Raker silently separated from Maiden and flew. Flames jetted from the Gale Thruster with ten times the force they had thus far. Blue lines ripped across the night sky.

Haruyuki opened both eyes wide as he dug deep for whatever strength he had left to keep up his attack. But even in the midst of his hyper-acceleration, he could barely catch sight of Raker as an afterimage.

The blue light hit Suntan Chafer, and she didn't get the chance to so much as cry out before she was knocked flying again and disappeared into the darkness of the bottom of the stage.

The light tightly cornered and blindsided Ash Roller and Iron Pound. Ash was just sent flying like Suntan, but Pound, with little left in his health gauge, turned into steel fragments and exploded outward.

Having dispatched the three green team members, Raker turned again and danced up behind Haruyuki.

Corvus!!

The instant her voice rang out in his brain, Haruyuki beat at the great shield in front of him with a roundhouse kick and used the force of the reaction to leap backward. Normally, the successive attack would have been judged to have ended there, and the physical damage accumulated in the Strife would have been returned twofold. But something plunged into the center of the shield with exquisite timing.

Kabooooom! The pointed toes and narrow heel of Sky Raker's right foot slammed into the great shield.

His mental reserves exhausted, Haruyuki floated with arms and legs splayed and tried to burn this image into his retinas and his memory.

The Gale Thruster equipped on Raker's back was turned completely around on her shoulders, so that its injection flames jetted back above her head. Her long silver hair flapped violently, and her slender torso and long right leg transformed into a lance to dig into the Arc of ultimate defense.



Pale sparks gushed from the surface of contact between Raker's sole and Grandé's shield. The sky around them rippled, perhaps because of this fearsome amount of power concentrated in one spot.

Master. Raker. Clenching his still red-hot fists, Haruyuki called to her in his heart. You...You alone were born to fly in this starry sky, the sole duel avatar built for space battle. In this place, no one can beat you. Even if that someone is a King.

Therefore...Therefore!!

"Pierce it, Raker!!"

It wasn't Haruyuki who shouted, but rather Kuroyukihime, who was off fighting Graphite Edge on a floating island in the distance. As if her voice was fuel, the blue flames jetting from Gale Thruster instantly burned brighter and hotter.

Suddenly, a low, heavy sound rumbled and shook the core of his body, and the Strife broke up into the four parts that comprised its shield. Haruyuki gritted his teeth in anticipation of a new attack.

But it wasn't.

Massive plumes of steam erupted from the sides of the four pieces held together with a brace. The shield was discharging the stored damage, having reached its limits for energy accumulation.

In the next instant, the equilibrium crumbled. The sound of a collision, several times more powerful than the earlier impact, shook the entire stage. The light of the impact became several concentric circles spreading out from the bottom of Raker's foot.

"...Impressive." Leaving only this word behind, the Green King was sent sailing into the stars, the separated cross shield still equipped in his left hand. Haruyuki had to take off his hat due to the fact that the King's health gauge did not drop even from such a powerful impact, but still, Grandé would be unable to return to the main battlefield for the time being.

Sky Raker did a nimble somersault and returned Gale Thruster to its usual position before turning toward Haruyuki and floating in place. "You fought well, Corvus," she said softly.

Haruyuki's eyes blurred with tears he didn't understand. "No, if you hadn't come, Master, he would've sent it back to me twofold and done me in..."

"That's not true." Fuko gently shook her head. "Because you didn't give up, because you kept attacking, Maiden and I were able to get here in time. And because of the damage you built up there, we broke through Grandé's shield...However, the battle's not over yet."

He bobbed his head as he took the proffered hand. He couldn't relax just yet.

From Great Wall, Viridian Decurion and Iron Pound had left the

field together. But Suntan Chafer, Lignum Vitae, Ash Roller, Graphite Edge, and Green Grandé were still active. All seven members of Nega Nebulus were still alive, but Cyan Pile had been severely injured, and Black Lotus had also taken serious damage. There was still the possibility of the green team turning the tables when its members returned from the abyss into which they'd been flung.

“Now then, he will prove troublesome if he stays in the field, so shall we go remove the one who's more sword than person?” Fuko said with a smile, lightly firing Gale Thruster while gripping Haruyuki's hand.

Surrounded by Lotus, Raker, Current, and Maiden, it was a mere thirty seconds later that Graphite Edge announced his surrender.

As soon as sixth-period homeroom ended and the teacher disappeared, the eighth grade's class 2 was filled with an animated buzz. Apparently, even the fact that it was Monday couldn't kill the excitement for the summer vacation that started in a week. The rainy season had only just ended, and the July sky was cheerfully bright at three thirty. Students on sports teams were scrambling to be the first ones out the door.

Shihoko Nago waited until the chaos had died down before standing up, schoolbag in hand. She cut across the back of the classroom and walked down the hallway, trying to avoid the eyes of the students laughing and chatting here and there. She steered clear of the crowded central stairs and raced up to the fourth floor via the stairs at the end of the building. When she reached the deserted floor where the special classrooms were concentrated, she let out a long sigh.

When had school become such a trial? It wasn't as though anyone was bullying her or she didn't get along with her classmates. Her grades were slightly above average, and she wasn't particularly bad at sports; at a glance, she seemed pretty average. In other words, in the Shikishima University-affiliated Sakurami Junior High School's eighth grade, Shihoko was firmly in the same place as the majority of students, and yet, for some reason, it was painful to her. She didn't feel like she belonged.

And maybe each of the students felt more or less the same. Maybe they were all desperately trying to read the room, go along with everyone around them, and work hard to keep from being deemed an outsider. Maybe this was just what it meant to be in junior high.

If that's the case, then I'm one of the lucky ones. The room might be small, but at least I have a place at school where I can relax, Shihoko told herself as she opened the door to the home ec room. Two people were already seated on the bench against the wall, and a wry smile rose unbidden to her lips. "You two are pretty fast, huh?"

"Oh!" The girl with the bobbed hair raised her sharp eyebrows slightly. "What's that about? You're the one who told us to come early

for a meeting, Shiho.”

The girl with glasses and shoulder-length hair pursed her lips. “And here I went to all the trouble of making you some brownies, Shiho.”

“What?” the first girl cried. “Really? All right! I’ll put on some tea!”

“Ooh, not for you, Sato!”

“Sweet Yume, there’s no way you wouldn’t have not made some for me, too!”

“There’s that twisted grammar of yours again.”

The corners of Shihoko’s mouth loosened once more at this exchange as she closed the door of the classroom.

The relatively tiny room—about seven and a half square meters—was the office for the cooking club that Sato (aka Satomi Mito), Yume (aka Yume Yuruki), and Shihoko Nago belonged to. The club had only been launched the previous year by Yume, so the three of them were the club’s only members.

Dropping her bag in the square woven basket in one corner, Shihoko headed toward the mini-kitchen to the rear. As Satomi got the container of tea down from the hanging shelf, Shihoko filled the electric kettle with water and turned it on. By the table behind them, Yume pulled brownies from the fridge.

Once they had prepared the tea, moving in a perfectly coordinated dance, they sat down at the table. The room was long and narrow, so Satomi and Yume had their backs to the cupboards, while Shihoko had hers almost up against the wall. They were allowed to use the kitchen classroom next door for club activities, but it was too big, and they were never quite comfortable in there. This room, however, was the perfect size for the smallest club at Sakurami Junior High.

Shihoko raised her cup and took a sip of the orange-flavored black tea, and the tension in both her body and her heart gradually melted away. School was a trial, but she had this brief time after classes with these two in their tiny sanctuary, so she somehow managed to drag herself in every day.

This was enough. She didn’t want anything more.

That’s what I’d always thought, at least.

Satomi stuffed her cheeks with a large bite of brownie and chewed away happily while Yume pushed up the bridge of her glasses neatly and said, “So, Shiho, have you decided when we’re going over there?”

“Mm-mm,” she hummed in response, before biting into her own brownie. The rich, full flavor of chocolate filled her mouth, a perfect complement to the orange tea. “You’re getting so much better, President. It’s like real chocolate. Although I haven’t eaten the real thing in eight years or so.”

“Right? The trick is to melt carob powder into butter and then really knead it— Wait!” Yume started to go along with Shihoko’s conversational turn before snapping back to her point. She leaned forward across the table. “I *am* the club president, but *you’re* the team leader, Shiho! Just suck it up and make a decision!”

“Uh, unh...It’s just...,” Shihoko mumbled, poking at her brownie with a fork.

“Honestly, quit dawdling already,” Satomi interjected, having finished her brownie in the blink of an eye. “I mean, you’re always so prim and proper on the other side, sounding all high and mighty. You need to get some self-confidence!”

“Nngh, nnggh...It’s just...” Half turning her eyes up at the ceiling, she looked at Yume and Satomi in turn.

Even in Shihoko’s eyes, they were cute. Boyish Satomi and intellectual Yume were different types, but they were fairly high rankers even among the eighth graders. There was no way she could have much confidence in front of the two of them.

As if reading her thoughts, Yume pulled a tabletop mirror from the shelf behind her and stood it on the table. “Look, you’re cute, Shiho! If you met in person, that bird boy would be knocked out in a single blow!”

“Th-that’s not the issue!” She hurriedly shook her head, but her gaze was nonetheless pulled into the reflection of herself in the mirror. Her face was the very definition of the word *average*. Her hair, too, was very junior high, parted in the middle and tied back. Her height and weight were also normal for her age. Everything about her was just average.

“No way. No. Way,” Shihoko groaned, flopping forward onto the table. “If they find out Little Miss Polite avatar has *this* inside her, they’ll think I’m this painful loser and kick me out of the Legion.”

“Huh. So you’re aware you’re a los—,” Satomi started, rather mercilessly.

Yume jabbed her sharply in the ribs to shut her up as she smiled brightly. “It’ll be fine, Shiho! You can’t be any more pitiful than that king, after all!”

“You. You can never say that to her,” Satomi warned. “Well anyway, yeah. I think you’re cute, too, Shiho.”

“So then tell me *how* I’m cute,” she demanded, raising her face marginally.

Satomi paused before answering. “You’re cute like the dried apricots in the *anmitsu* at Mizunoya.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Dropping her face to the table again with a thump, Shihoko muttered, “And the reason my duel avatar’s Chocolat Puppeteer is because I can’t have chocolate thanks to

a cocoa allergy. It's just too obvious..."

"If we're going to get into that, I mean, my last name's Mito, and my avatar name's Mint Mitten!" Satomi argued with puffed cheeks. "It's not even like I care one way or the other about mint! On top of that, Mito Satomi's a palindrome!"

Yume patted her shoulder with a smile. "I'm sure it's just because you have no mental trauma, Sato. So the BB system created your avatar from your name."

"You think? But, like, I do too! I mean, I got, like, ten or twenty mental scars, easy!"

"Huh. Like what?"

"Um...well...I mean, you're one to talk! You became Plum Flipper just because you had the nickname Plum in elementary!"

"I did not!" Yume protested. "It's because I almost died when a dried plum got stuck in my throaaaat!"

"Whatever!" Satomi rolled her eyes.

Listening to her friends bicker, Shihoko munched on the last bite of brownie and let the flavor melt in her mouth.

Instead of chocolate chips or cocoa powder, the brownie was made from the powder of Mediterranean beans. Shihoko could not have any kind of chocolate whatsoever because of her allergy, so Yume and Satomi had developed this recipe for her.

Chocolate was used in all kinds of treats and drinks, so the allergy had been fairly difficult to cope with when she was small. She'd eat some chocolate without realizing it and then have trouble breathing and be whisked off to the hospital. But to be honest, she had a hard time believing that those memories were sufficiently traumatic to be the mold for her duel avatar. She just came off like some kind of weird glutton.

"But, like, just 'cause we're meeting in the real doesn't mean they're gonna suddenly start talking avatar origin stories," she muttered as if trying to convince herself. "That's like the most private of private..."

Satomi and Yume turned toward her at the same time and nodded in agreement.

"That's totally right, Shiho!" Satomi agreed. "I'm telling ya, there's nothing to be freaked about!"

"Right, exactly," Yume chimed in. "I'm sure they're nice people, probably!"

"And they won that tough fight against GW! Seriously amazing!"

"And they were up against five of the Six Armors, too!"

"Are you that psyched to meet them?" Shihoko asked, and her friends exchanged a glance before giggling awkwardly. She flashed them an exasperated smile and looked around the small, comfortable

cooking prep room.

The name Petit Paquet, the Legion the three of them had formed, had, of course, come from this room. Here, they made treats, chatted, and dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field to see her friend Coolu. They didn't duel much, and the Territories didn't matter to them at all, so other Burst Linkers might have assumed they were not very serious as a Legion. But the Legion meant everything to them. The time they spent together was precious.

But Petit Paquet had been disbanded three days earlier—the evening of Friday, July 12. And then the three had become members of the Legion that controlled the adjacent Sugunami area, Nega Nebulus.

They had immediately jumped in with the Territories' defense the following day, and she thought they'd not done too badly against the Green Legion team, even though they weren't really used to that sort of thing. But Shihoko and her friends had received an unexpected invitation after that from the Black King, Black Lotus, their new Legion Master, to come meet in the real world and talk.

"We will most certainly take it into consideration!" Shihoko had responded, quickly and arrogantly, before bursting out, where she sat clutching her head in her hands before the exasperated Satomi and Yume at this very table. She had, in fact, been considering it for two full days since then, and her hesitation had not disappeared.

It wasn't simply a fear of breaking the taboo of outing themselves in the real. When she asked, she learned the seven members of Nega Nebulus had been meeting in the real for a while now, and the risk of revealing her real-world self was far greater for the Black King, the greatest traitor in the entire Accelerated World. In fact, Shihoko was forced to conclude that the Black Legion fully trusted her and her friends.

The truth was, she wasn't hesitating; she was afraid. The most average of average, Shihoko Nago, did not have the courage to stand before World's End, Black Lotus—a legend in the Accelerated World—"Strato-Shooter" Sky Raker, and Silver Crow.

She reached a hand out toward the mirror still on the table and slammed it shut before sighing for the nth time. Shihoko had become a Burst Linker two years earlier when she was in sixth grade. Her parent was Satomi, who'd been in her class. Not only had they not been particularly close, they'd barely spoken, so Shihoko was surprised when Satomi first called out to her. And she was even more surprised when, in a corner of the schoolyard, Satomi asked, "Do you like games?"

Not long after she became a Burst Linker, she had asked why Satomi decided to make her her scion, but Satomi had only laughed

and said, "It felt right."

Shihoko didn't exactly get it then, but later, when she saw Yume reading a cake recipe book in the school library, Shihoko herself "felt right," so maybe that was all it was.

Interrupting her thoughts, she pushed back her chair and was about to stand up to make more tea when Satomi said, in an unusually quiet voice, "So, like, I..."

As Shihoko sat down again, Yume also turned to look at the girl.

"So, like, I'm super-happy to be sitting here with you now, chatting and eating sweets. I mean, I thought I was going to lose all this." She slowly lifted her hand to press the center of her chest through the ribbon of her sailor uniform. As if pulled in, Yume made the same gesture. "To be honest, I can't really remember the time when I was parasitized by the ISS kit. You said to just forget it, Shiho, and I do want to do that...But it's not okay to forget everything. Yume and I did terrible things to you and Coolu, things we can't take back. And then Silver Crow and Lime Bell just happened to come along and save us. I can never, ever forget that."



Yume and Shihoko nodded slowly. A faint smile rising up on her face, Satomi nodded back and started to speak again.

“My parent was this older girl who lived in my neighborhood, but two months after she gave me Brain Burst, she lost all her points. I was super-sad then; I felt so alone. I stopped caring about dueling, and I left my global connection off for ages. I even thought about quitting the game. But I guess I did have unfinished business in the Accelerated World. And like, whatever I say, I actually do like my avatar a fair bit.”

The other two nodded again, deeply. Their duel avatars were not merely game characters. They were unique versions of themselves born from their own identities.

“So it was when I was all lost, there was a bit of a thing in class. At lunchtime, this dumb boy was fooling around, and he dropped some chocolate sauce on this girl’s bread. But she had a cocoa allergy, right? So the girl, she yells ‘Fine! You eat it!’ and slams the bread into the idiot’s face, and he had to get down on his hands and knees while looking totally ridiculous. It was so good.”

Shihoko felt her face grow hot. She did feel like maybe there had been a thing like that when she was in sixth grade. “Was that maybe *that*?” she asked Satomi.

“Yeah, that’s when it clicked. I’d always pegged her for a quiet kid, but then it was like ‘Oh, you’re a fighter.’ And just as I expected, she succeeded in installing Brain Burst, and she even went on to claim her own child not long after that. I was so happy. That time was...” Satomi looked as though she was thinking hard about those days, and Shihoko also fell into thought before being pulled back by her. “Actually, how *did* you and Yume meet the condition for BB installation, Shiho? That one about having a Neurolinker equipped right after you were born.”

“You’re asking that *now*?!” Shihoko slumped down in her chair and cleared her throat. “I was kind of premature, so I had one to monitor my vitals. And I’m pretty sure it was early education for you, Yume?”

“Iit waaas. Didn’t do much, though.” She giggled, the light glinting off her glasses, but there was no doubt that of the three of them, she had the best grades. “So what about you, Sato?”

“Oh! It was the education thing for me, too,” Satomi replied, somewhat awkwardly.

“It waaas?” Yume quipped. “No effect, hmm...?”

“Yeah— Hey! Don’t go saying that! I mean, I’m in the middle of a super-good story here! Shut up and listen!” Satomi kicked and pouted in her seat for a minute before cocking her head to one side. “Uh,

where was I?"

Swallowing a sigh, Shihoko picked up the thread of conversation. "Yume and I became Burst Linkers, and you were sobbing, overcome with emotion."

"I—I wasn't crying! Um, so basically, what I'm trying to say here is we might have disbanded for now in terms of the system, but I super-super-super-love Petit Paquet. And I'm super-super-super-super-grateful to the bird and Bell for saving it when it was on the verge of being destroyed. So I wanna fight with them. And...if we can be friends with them in the real, then I wanna do that, too."

Shihoko yanked her head up with a gasp.

Satomi had said she was happy that Shihoko became a Burst Linker. But the truth was, Shihoko was the one who'd been rescued. She'd finally found a place in this painful world where she could actually be comfortable. For Shihoko, Petit Paquet and this prep room were a shelter. Here, there was nothing to fear. She could breathe so deeply, the air filled her lungs.

But she couldn't stay closed off in a little box forever. Nothing lasted forever, not in the Accelerated World and not in the real world, either. At some point, the time would come when the lid was lifted off the box, and she would have to go outside. No matter how hard it was, the time would certainly come when she would have to try her best to breathe and move forward.

The truth was, that opportunity might have already come a long time ago. It might have been the day when the white crow suddenly danced down in the Unlimited Neutral Field and offered her his hand. Sinking into thought once again, she stared absently at her own hand.

"Aah, Shiho, you're thinking about that time when the crow was licking you!" Yume said, laughing.

"Wha—? N-no! I was just thinking about how I'd punch him when we met in the real!" She clenched her hand into a fist and stood up forcefully before announcing, "I've decided! We're going to Suginami tomorrow after school!"

""Woool!"" Satomi and Yume cried out together and clapped.

"So then, let's make some treats to take!" Satomi said. "I wanna be in charge of the tarts! Tarts!"

"If we're gonna do it, let's make some treats that are like us," Yume suggested. "Mint cheesecake, aaaand plum tart, aaaand carob-chocolate gâteau maybeee?"

"All right! We'll go stock up at the market by the station and then go to your place, Yume!"

""Let's do it!"" They each thrust a hand up into the air.

"That's gonna take so long, though," Shihoko complained as she looked up at the small kitchen window. There, the shadow of a bird

cut briefly across a summer sky tinged with the faintest orange.

“Just because the rainy season’s over doesn’t mean it has to suddenly go full summer on us,” Haruyuki grumbled, the western sun burning into his back. He was on his way home from school after taking care of Hoo, so it was around four, but the temperature displayed on his virtual desktop was exactly thirty degrees Celsius. He wanted to get home as quickly as possible and throw himself into the air-conditioned lobby of his condo, but before he could do that, he had one other mission to accomplish.

Wednesday, July 17th. Glaring at the date below the temperature, he bent each of the fingers of his right hand. No matter how many times he counted, the fateful Saturday was three days away.

Saturday morning was the long-awaited closing ceremony for the end of the term. Perhaps thanks to the superhard-mode study group organized by Kuroyukihime, the results of his final exams had been miraculously good, so he wasn’t particularly gloomy about his report card. Once summer vacation started, he wouldn’t be able to see Kuroyukihime as often, but he’d still have to go to school to take care of Hoo, so he’d probably get the chance to see her then. And in August, they were all going to go to Yamagata, which was extremely exciting.

If it had been just that, then he might actually have been able to look forward to Saturday, but the problem was that afternoon. Four o’clock, to be specific. That was when Nega Nebulus would finally attack Minato Area No. 3 in the Territories, using the recently returned Shibuya Area No. 2 as the bridgehead. They would attack the territory of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe—and the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society.

As for the details involved in this, Nega Nebulus would register an attack on Shibuya Area No. 1, and then immediately prior to four o’clock, Great Wall would abandon the territory. As long as there were no other attacking teams—and the assumption was that there most certainly would not be—Shibuya Area No. 1 would become black territory without a fight, so they would immediately register to attack neighboring Shibuya No. 2, and green would abandon once more. And

with that, not even a minute past four o'clock, both areas would have been returned to Nega Nebulus.

Haruyuki and the others on the attacking team would then go to Minato Area No. 3 in the real world and register an attack. Naturally, the Oscillatory Universe would have a defense team registered, so the real Territories would begin there. If they won, the black flag would fly in Minato Area No. 3, and the White Legion would lose the privilege of blocking the matching list. Nega Nebulus would check the list, and if even one member of the Acceleration Research Society appeared on it, they would be able to state that the White Legion clearly was the Acceleration Research Society.

That was the general strategy, but there were just two problems. The first was who to ask to take on the role of a third-party matching-list confirmation—the observer.

This witness was key to everything, so it had to be a Burst Linker with status and popularity. And because they would need to tell him or her in advance that the reason Nega Nebulus was invading Oscillatory territory was because they had Oscillatory pegged as the ringleader, this Burst Linker had to be someone they could trust not to leak the information. Great Wall would be seen as having assisted Nega Nebulus, so they couldn't ask anyone from the Green Legion. For the same reason, Prominence was also out of the question.

Which left only three major Legions: Blue Leonids, Purple Aurora, and Yellow CCC. Haruyuki would have been hard-pressed to say that they had a friendly relationship with any of them, but purple and yellow held clear enmity toward black, so by process of elimination, blue was their only option. They couldn't possibly ask the Blue King himself, however, so they would have to negotiate in secret with some high-ranking member.

The second issue was who to send in the attack on Minato Area No. 3. Naturally, it would have been ideal to have Nega Nebulus's full force on the team. Minato was split into three areas, and even if Oscillatory divided their defensive power evenly, there would probably be at least two people from the executive Seven Dwarves, together with another ten general members.

As a general rule in the Territories, the number of people on the attacking side was matched to the number on the defending side. If there were fewer on the defending side, the attacking side was automatically adjusted downward, but in the case where there were more on the defending side, the match would simply go forward without any team modifications. In other words, assuming the Oscillatory team would have twelve people, they wouldn't be able to fight fairly in terms of numbers unless they put together a team the same size.

But currently, the full force of Nega Nebulus, including the Petit Paquet group who had just joined, was a mere ten people. Even if they did attempt the attack with the whole Legion, the defending side would likely still have more members. And they had to leave at least three people for the defense of Suginami, which meant only seven could make the trip to Minato.

At the meeting the previous day, Kuroyukihime had insisted petulantly that she would go, but everyone else frantically worked to dissuade her and somehow managed to get her to stand down. If in the worst case, the White King herself happened to be leading the Oscillatory defense team, the Territories would suddenly turn into a final battle of king vs. king.

Kuroyukihime insisted that since no Burst Points were transferred to her in the Territories, the level-nine sudden-death rule also wouldn't apply. But without any definite information on this front, they couldn't expose their Legion Master to the risk of sudden death. Haruyuki had already been incredibly anxious in Sunday's Battle Royale with Great Wall. With the clearly hostile White King as her opponent, they needed Kuroyukihime to be careful with anything and everything on Saturday.

The one who finally persuaded her was, surprisingly, Chocolat Puppeteer, aka Shihoko Nago, taking part in a meeting in the real world for the first time. She didn't sound as formally girlish in the real; in fact, she projected the image of being a serious, polite girl. She stared at Kuroyukihime as if dazzled when she had said, "It's very painful and sad to have that bond severed when your heart is connected to someone. It's probably the saddest thing that can happen in the Accelerated World. We joined Nega Nebulus because we don't want anyone else to have to go through that again. I understand that the battle on Saturday is very important. But I think what's even more important is that everyone here now can continue being Burst Linkers forever."

Shihoko had experienced the loss of this bond with Mint Mitten and Plum Flipper, who were also her close friends in the real, and her words had a gravity that forced Kuroyukihime to assent. Although it might also have been the fact that the three homemade cakes the girls brought for everyone were surprisingly delicious.

"Cooking club, huh? Lucky. They get to make cakes like that at school and eat them every day, I guess," he muttered, reflecting on the rich flavor of the carob-chocolate gâteau he had taken an enormous liking to, then shook his head to get back on track. Before he knew it, he had walked almost to the intersection of Shinoume Highway and Kannana Street. Normally, he'd turn left there to go home, but in order to complete the mission he'd been given, he had to cross

Kannana and get on a bus.

“Fwoo...Haah...” He took a few deep breaths while he waited for the light to change to relieve even a tiny bit of the pressure he felt.

UI> YOU CAN DO IT!

A chat window jumped up in his field of view, and Haruyuki jumped.

“Waah?!” He whirled around to find the smiling face of the super president whom he’d parted with when he left school fifteen minutes earlier, Utai Shinomiya. “Sh-Shinomiya, why?! Didn’t you go home?!”

Stunned, he blinked in rapid succession, but no matter how he looked at it, the Utai there in her snow-white dress-type uniform with the brown backpack over her shoulders was the real deal. There wasn’t a drop of sweat on the forehead beneath her neatly arranged bangs, but that wasn’t because she was an AR image; rather, it was the difference in their mental training.

The fingers of her small hands flashed, and words scrolled through his chat window. UI> YOU SEEMED ANXIOUS, ARITA, SO I LEFT MY THINGS AT A RENTAL LOCKER AT SHIN-KOENJI STATION AND CAME AFTER YOU.

“Huh? So you were behind me the whole time?”

UI> I OVERHEARD PERFECTLY WHEN YOU WERE TALKING TO YOURSELF BEFORE. YOU AREN’T THINKING ABOUT QUITTING THE ANIMAL CARE CLUB TO JOIN THE COOKING CLUB, ARE YOU?

Utai pursed her lips adorably.

“I—I wasn’t. Not at all!” He hurriedly shook his head. “Nothing like that! It’s just like...Sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. And your house is in the opposite direction. You came out of your way to see me off...”

Now Utai was the one who was surprised. UI> I’M NOT SEEING YOU OFF, THOUGH. I WOULDN’T HAVE LEFT MY THINGS IN A LOCKER JUST FOR THAT. I’M COMING WITH YOU, OF COURSE!

“Whoa!” All Haruyuki could do was cry out once more.

After they crossed Kannana, got on the EV bus, and sat down next to each other in a two-person seat, Haruyuki let out a sigh. The air-conditioning in the bus was weak, but compared with outside, where the temperature soared past thirty degrees, it was heavenly. Around the time he finally stopped sweating, he had a sudden thought.

“That reminds me. There’s no air conditioner in the animal hutch at Umesato. Is Hoo going to be okay in the heat?”

UI> HE’S A NORTHERN WHITE-FACED OWL, SO HE CAN DEAL QUITE WELL WITH HEAT, BUT WE WILL NEED A HEATER IN THE WINTER. LET’S TALK WITH SACCHI ABOUT PUTTING SOME SOLAR PANELS ON THE HUTCH OR MOVING HIM SOMEWHERE FOR THE WINTER.

“Right. I guess he’s originally from Africa, after all. I’ll check into how much it would cost to install a solar heating system.”

UI> THANK YOU, MR. PRESIDENT. Utai grinned and returned her hands to her lap.

The bus traveling east along Shinoume Highway entered Nakano Area No. 2 a little past Higashi-Koenji Station. The Leonids had temporarily occupied the area during the Saturday Territories in order to attack Suginami, but as a general rule, it was unoccupied, so there were plenty of duels unfolding even on a weekday evening.

Naka-2 was where Haruyuki had first dueled against Wolfram Cerberus. It seemed like a hundred years ago, but it had actually been a mere three weeks earlier. But far too many things had happened in those three weeks, and Cerberus was now gone from the Accelerated World.

Cerberus III, aka the copy of Dusk Taker, had stolen the Invincible thrusters from Niko, but system-wise, the thrusters should have still been in the possession of Cerberus I. He assumed the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, also remained with Cerberus, so there was no way that the vast negative Incarnate energy, far surpassing that of the ISS kit terminals, was not having a negative effect on Cerberus in the real world.

In the heart of one of Koenji's bustling shopping areas known as Look Street, the Cerberus Haruyuki had encountered for the briefest of moments had been a small-statured, gentle-looking young boy. A strong light had shone in his clear eyes, despite the fact that he had been made a Burst Linker through the inhuman experiment that was the artificial metal color project. If he closed his eyes, Haruyuki could vividly remember the figure of Cerberus smiling at Haruyuki and bowing deeply, hands at his side.

Today's objective was Shinjuku Area No. 3 on the other side of Nakano Area No. 2, but once they got into Nakano, he would accelerate for a second and check the matching list. Maybe Cerberus's name would be on it.

Utai started tapping at her holokeyboard again. UI> ARITA, BEFORE WE GO INTO THE NAKANO AREA, HOW ABOUT WE TEAM UP?

"Huh?"

UI> IF YOU'RE SOLO, YOU'LL PROBABLY BE CHALLENGED BY ANY NUMBER OF PEOPLE, C.

"I—I guess. I haven't been doing too many free duels lately."

UI> THAT'S WHY! YOU WERE VERY ACTIVE IN THE METATRON MISSION, AND RUMOR OF THAT HAS SPREAD QUITE FAR AND WIDE, SO I'M SURE THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE WHO'D LIKE TO HEAR THE STORY.

"Huh. There's basically nothing I can tell, though." Everyone probably wanted to know how he defended against Metatron's sudden-death laser, but he couldn't exactly run around blabbing about the performance and weak points of his ability Optical Conduction.

And he hesitated to lie and say he'd gotten the Theoretical Mirror ability he'd been asked to get. Moreover, he absolutely could not leak to anyone the existence of the true form of the Archangel Metatron and the fact that she was now a member of Nega Nebulus.

"O-okay then, please team up with me," Haruyuki said hurriedly as he watched the sign for Higashi-Koenji Station pass by the window.

UI > THAT'S ROGER AND A GO!

They pressed the BB icon on their virtual desktops at the same time and specified their tag partner in the console. Now they would appear on the matching list as a team, and there likely weren't too many warriors who would see the name Silver Crow alongside Ardor Maiden's and still come to challenge him.

This also meant that if he did see Wolfram Cerberus's name on the list, Haruyuki would be unable to challenge him, but in that case, he could explain the reason and temporarily leave the team.

"Um, Shinomiya. Once we're on the area border, I'd like to give the list a quick check," he said as he closed his console.

Utai looked at him with those eyes that seemed to see through everything and nodded firmly.

Thirty seconds later, the EV bus drove leisurely in the left lane out of the Suginami area and into Nakano. Haruyuki closed his eyes and prayed briefly for a miracle. He had to assume that, normally, Wolfram Cerberus wouldn't make the trip to Nakano without a reason when his home was in Minato. In fact, if Cerberus *had* returned to the duels with the Armor of Catastrophe still living inside him, that would mean the Society was conspiring again, and he would definitely not be happy about that.

Even so, he couldn't stop himself from praying. If he could just see him again, if they could exchange words—and blows—he was sure he could pull Cerberus back from that spiritual darkness. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth, ready to call out "Burst Link."

Skreeeeee!! The screech of acceleration shot through his head. Flaming text burned brightly in his vision, announcing the appearance of a challenger. Someone had come to challenge the tag team of Haruyuki and Utai.

The EV bus stopped on the road and melted into the air. The buildings standing on either side of the street also vanished one after another, and the afternoon summer sky rapidly darkened.

His silver-armored feet touched down on thin grass that reached his knees. A sea of grass swayed in the wind as far as he could see.

"It's a Grassland stage, then," said the shrine maiden avatar next to him, sounding a little bittersweet. But it made sense; the first time he'd teamed up with her, they'd fought Bush Utan and Olive Grab in a Grassland stage.

Nakano Area No. 2 was also adjacent to the Shibuya area in the south, so it was possible that Utan and Grab were the duelers again today. Or maybe it was the famed Leonids duo, Frost Horn and Tourmaline Shell. *All right then, who is this reckless fool from wherever who would challenge the shrine maiden of the conflagration?* With a bit of a borrowed swagger, Haruyuki looked up at the health gauges in the upper right of his field of view and a “Whoa!” slipped out of his mouth for the third time that day.

The name neatly laid out on the first of the two gauges was Cobalt Blade. And on the second gauge was Manganese Blade.

“Wh-why are *they* in Naka-two?!” Haruyuki reeled.

“How like you, C, to draw such a favorable lot!” Utai clapped her hands. “This will save us the time of going all the way to Shinjuku.”

“Uh. Th-that’s true, but I was planning to talk with everyone in the Gallery...”

“In the Gallery, we’ll be cut off once the duel ends, but if we’re all duelers, then we can have the full thirty minutes to discuss. And moreover, the likelihood that they would agree to talk to us is very low. Now that they’ve challenged us, I believe our only choice is to fight first.”

“I—I guess. But how are we going to...?” he wondered.

“I am merely accompanying you, C,” Utai replied, cherubic eye lenses shining. “Thus, I will follow your strategy.”

“...R-right...” He’d had a feeling she’d say something like that, so he nodded firmly and looked around the stage.

Some distance away, avatars were standing in twos and threes around the vast grassy plain, but they were part of the Gallery. He narrowed his eyes and stared hard, but unfortunately, he couldn’t see Cerberus among them.

The two light-blue guide cursors displayed on top of each other in the center of the lower part of his field of view were both motionless, pointing due north. Did that mean that their opponents were not moving from their point of origin? Or that they were approaching in a straight line? Given that he was up against Coba-Manga, it was probably the latter.

His opponents were a tag team of the most powerful class of close-range types in the Accelerated World outside of the kings. If he and Utai were going for victory, the best strategy would be to take advantage of the fact that duels began with the duelers a significant distance from one another, and they would keep running away, unilaterally attacking with Utai’s flaming arrows.

But Haruyuki dared to keep his feet planted on their appearance point. It meant throwing away the one advantage they had over their superpowerful opponents, but as long as they had this stage and this

team, they had a trump card that could turn the tables in the second half with one blow.

“Um, okay then, in the opening, please stick it out for a bit. I’ll take Manga, so I’d like you to look after Cobra, Mei,” Haruyuki instructed.

The shrine maiden cocked her head to one side. “Which one is Manga and which one is Cobra again?”

“Uh, um. The one with the bluish armor and pigtails is Cobra, and the one that’s just a little green with the ponytail is Manga.”

“Understood!” Utai nodded sharply and slowly raised her longbow.

At the same time, Haruyuki felt a cool wind blowing in from the north. No, that wasn’t it. From the way the grass was dancing, the wind blowing through the stage was southerly, so what he was feeling was extremely refined battle spirit...Or else, a high ranker’s information pressure wave. Straining his eyes to the north, Haruyuki saw two silhouettes slipping toward them in the sea of grass, which shone a golden-green in the evening sun.

Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, twin soldiers and close aides of the Leonids leader, Blue Knight. Their heavy armor was patterned after that of samurai and deeply intimidating, while the greatswords on their left hips communicated their razor-sharpness without even being drawn.

When they stopped about ten meters away, the number of people in the Gallery spiked due to the automatic transfer function. He checked one more time, but of course, Cerberus was not among them.

Normally, jeers and cheers would be flying through the air, but today, perhaps overwhelmed by the threatening presence of the soldiers, everyone was waiting quietly for the start of the fighting.

Gulping hard, Haruyuki was about to try announcing his business with them since he had nothing to lose.

But before he could open his mouth, the ponytailed Manganese Blade announced in a brilliantly clear voice, “So you’re level six now, hmm, Silver Crow?”

“Oh.” He unconsciously dipped his head at this unexpected comment. “Y-yes. Thanks.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not congratulating you!”

And of course, he was rebuked by Cobalt Blade, causing him to shrink into himself with a squeak.

The pigtailed soldier pointed squarely at Haruyuki and continued as if talking to herself, “Level four is still a babe, level five, finally a novice, but if you have reached level six, then I will not treat you as a forelock.”

“...Forelock? What does that mean...?” Haruyuki muttered.

“It refers to a young samurai before his coming of age,” Utai quickly interpreted for him, “because he’s not yet shaved his forelocks, the hair in the front of his head.”

“O-oh, I see.” He bobbed his head, and now Manganese was angry with him.

“You! Listen well!”

The twin soldiers gripped their swords at the same time, with the same relative hand, and shouted in perfect sync, ““No insufficiency in a tag team of opponents of levels six and seven! Now, as always, the contest!!””

No way they’re gonna go for dueling another time and just talking today, huh? Accepting his fate, Haruyuki gave a brief instruction to his partner. “Just like I said before. Please hang on until our gauges are charged!”

“Roger that!” She nodded and drew her bowstring halfway back. And then Ardor Maiden abruptly turned toward the soldier to the right, the double-horned Cobalt Blade, and charged.

“Wha—?!” he cried out, once more dumbfounded. But he couldn’t freeze now. He dashed after Maiden and moved to get the first hit in on Manganese Blade to the left.

The soldiers moved in perfect sync once more as they leaned forward, gripping the hilts. Anticipating that they would draw and strike in one stroke, Haruyuki felt the core of his body become as cold as ice.

This was the first time he’d fought Manganese, but he actually didn’t have that much experience fighting other sword-wielding avatars, either. This was because, as a flying type, he inevitably ended up with gun users as opponents. But his teacher was the most powerful blade user in the Accelerated World, and their numerous bouts had given Haruyuki serious confidence. No matter how sharp Manganese’s slicing attack, it couldn’t have been greater than Black Lotus’s Terminate Sword. *Step past the fear and go forward!*

““*Shah!!*”” Not even a millimeter of difference between them, Cobalt and Manganese unsheathed their swords simultaneously.

Haruyuki used the slipperiness of the grassy field to slide beneath the flash of Manganese’s sideways scythe. The blade grazed his mirrored goggles, and dazzling sparks burned his field of view.

On the right side, Utai jumped without warning and leapt over Cobalt’s slicing blade. Although she was a pure long-distance type, she apparently intended to seriously take on the challenge of a close-range battle with a female warrior who was the bluest of blue.

The soldiers yanked the blades back above their heads with impossible speed and, this time, brought them directly downward. ““*Seh!!*””

If he stopped sliding, his helmet would be split in two. Understanding this instinctively, Haruyuki used the mere pixels charged up in his special-attack gauge from the scratch he received earlier to vibrate the wings on his back for a microsecond. The generated thrust accelerated his slide and pushed his avatar directly below the falling blade.

Ting! Once again, there was a small, sharp metallic sound, and the blade grazed the top of his helmet. The downward slash severed the surrounding grasses, and the blades of green danced up into the air, while Haruyuki shrank into himself, slipped between Manganese's legs, and grabbed at the grass on either side as makeshift emergency brakes.

How's Mei?! Haruyuki glanced over to the left as he bounced back up.

Arдор Maiden had firmly caught Cobalt Blade's slash with the top of the longbow Flame Caller in her hand. Here, for the first time, the twin soldiers' synchronization crumbled.

"Nngh!" Cobalt abandoned the push-pull struggle with the longbow and leapt backward.

Assuming the priority of the Enhanced Armaments was equal, Cobalt was definitely superior to Maiden in terms of physical avatar strength. If she had just kept going, she should have been able to use brute force to push back the bow and slice into Maiden's armor.

The reason Cobalt put some distance between them instead of doing that was because of the bright-red flames generated when Utai pulled the bowstring back with her right hand while she held the sword in check with her left. A flaming arrow aimed at her face, a mere dozen or so centimeters away, didn't leave Cobalt much choice.

Utai shot her flaming arrow at Cobalt, who was still very much in range. But her enemy was no fool; she made an impressive catch with the blade of her sword, and the arrow's scattering flames made the evening grasslands shine red.

Meanwhile, Haruyuki charged forward in a fierce dash, straight for Manganese. Before the warrior could get into position for a slicing attack, he closed the distance between them to zero. The twin's blade was likely eighty centimeters long, but she wouldn't be able to use it if he glued himself to her.

"Ha!" Stepping deep into Manganese's space, he launched a right short hook. This was blocked with her gauntlet, but he immediately took aim at her body with his left fist. She was unable to defend in time with her sword hand, and he landed a hit on her side where her armor was thinner, finally stealing a bit of her health gauge.

"Impudence!" The warrior grimaced and moved to slam the hilt of her sword in Haruyuki's face. But Takumu had used this technique on

him in fights, and he knew to duck to the right to avoid it before beating at her body once again with his left knee.

Once again, he got a clean hit, but it was actually too good, and the impact pushed Manganese back. Taking advantage of the moment's respite this brought her, the warrior tried to lash out with a compact face strike. But Haruyuki threw the bundle of grass he'd yanked up when emergency braking at her face, and she immediately closed her eyes, knocking her attack slightly off course.

Using the opportunity, he glued himself to her again and cut away at her gauge with a series of short punches.

Ardor Maiden was also proving more than equal to Cobalt in a close-range fight. She wasn't sticking quite as closely to her opponent as Silver Crow, and that she managed to continually evade the warrior's slicing attacks was solely due to the overwhelming power of her bow.

With Flame Caller, there was no need to pull an arrow from a quiver and nock it. She only had to draw the bowstring back a certain amount with her left hand, and a flame arrow was instantly generated. To Haruyuki, it looked like she was launching more than one arrow a second. She wasn't pulling the string back all that far, so each arrow didn't carry that much force, but the barrage was more than enough to check Cobalt's approach.

Two hundred seconds into the duel, the health gauges of Crow and Maiden were holding at more than 90 percent, while those of Cobalt and Manganese had dropped to nearly 70 percent. Naturally, Haruyuki didn't think they could keep this up right to the end. But if they could steal 50 percent of their gauges before the breakthrough—i.e., when the enemy started using their special attacks—their chances of victory would increase significantly.

“Go!” he shouted briefly at himself and kicked off the ground. He was about to launch the technique he'd christened Aerial Combo, a high-speed, three-dimensional charge that made use of the instantaneous thrust from the wings on his back.

However, Haruyuki—and probably Utai, too—hadn't noticed that Manganese and Cobalt Blade, who were supposedly fighting separately, had at some point started to approach each other, backs coming together.

“Sehaaaaaah!!” With a battle cry that shook the air around them, Manganese swung the sword in her right hand out horizontally.

If it had been the same slice as the one she'd been using so far, he would have been able to close the distance and evade it. But there was no need for that. Although her eyes remained on him, Manganese's target was not Haruyuki in front of her, but somewhere directly behind her.

For a moment, Haruyuki's brain froze at the unexpected and seemingly entirely useless action. Thus, he was late to react to the second sword that came flying in from outside his field of view.

"Ngh!" Haruyuki moaned as a searing impact assaulted his right arm. The blade ripped deeply into his armor, and a crimson damage effect spilled out. If he had taken just one more step toward Manganese, his arm would have been cut off at the shoulder.

At precisely the same time, he heard Utai's small voice from behind the warrior sister. Here, Haruyuki finally grasped what had happened.

Their backs perfectly aligned, Manganese and Cobalt had attacked at the same time to the rear. Cobalt's blade came at him from completely outside his awareness, while Manganese's struck Maiden. This terrifying duo of twin soldiers could pull off a simultaneous attack to the rear without any kind of signal, without so much as looking at each other. If their breath had been 0.1 seconds off, their falling blades would have cut into each other.

In order to avoid a follow-up attack, Haruyuki got some serious distance from his opponent, but Manganese did not come to close it. He checked on Maiden on the other side of Cobalt. Her right arm had also been sliced into, and she pulled back, abandoning her barrage of flame arrows.

The twin soldiers readied their greatswords at precisely mid-body, backs still pressed together.

Manganese opened her mouth first. "It's been quite a while since I was hit to that extent by a fighting type. It seems your points were well earned, Silver Crow."

After this, Cobalt turned to Utai. "Indeed, to be so toyed with at close range by a bow user. This is truly the Testarossa whose name is known throughout the Accelerated World, Ardor Maiden."

"But we could never show our faces again in Shinjuku if we allowed ourselves to be defeated so."

"The time has come for us to use the ace up our sleeves."

The synchronized speech ended, and the twin samurai sheathed their swords almost languidly. But it was obvious that this did not signal the end of the fighting. An ironlike battle spirit jetted up from the soldiers' feet as they lowered their stances, making the grass around them ripple and sway. The sisters weren't glowing, so this was no Incarnate overlay, but Haruyuki felt a shiver of fear at this aura. It was so powerful he almost wished it *was* Incarnate.

Intuiting that it would be very bad if he took a direct hit from the next attack, Haruyuki determined that it was also time for them to pull out their own trump card and turn the battle around.

He deployed the wings on his back. His special-attack gauge was

60 percent charged; Utai's 70. They weren't going to make it to full gauges, but this would be enough.

"Just what I was hoping for!!" he yelled at the soldiers, then kicked off the ground. He feinted as if he were charging forward and then detoured wide to the right in front of Cobalt.

"Mei!" he shouted, reaching out with his right hand. Utai grabbed it with her own injured right, and he ascended straight up with everything he had.

Haruyuki had assumed that Manganese and Cobalt would aim for the moment when he picked up Maiden, so when the twins didn't so much as twitch, it felt a little anticlimactic as he gained an altitude of fifty meters in the blink of an eye.

He held Maiden in his arms and shifted to hovering mode before looking down at the stage. He caught sight of the soldiers, beans dropped down in the center of the vast grassy plain illuminated by the evening sun.

The formidable enemy Dusk Taker, who had once stolen Haruyuki's silver wings, had been elated with his own success, crying out, "...The combination of flight with long-distance firepower is incredible...To be perfectly frank, I'm invincible."

Haruyuki wouldn't go so far as to say they were unbeatable, but once he brought their close-range blue tag-team opponents to this situation, their victory was 90 percent certain. From high in the sky, where enemy swords most certainly could not reach, they would attack unilaterally with Utai's flame arrows. Moreover, this was the Grassland stage, where there were basically no obstacles. Or anything to hide behind.

But is this way of winning really okay?

As if sensing the momentary hesitation in Haruyuki's heart, Utai said, "No matter the situation, never forget to respect your opponent and leave it all on the battlefield. Don't hold anything back. That is the underlying principle of the duel, C."

She pulled back Flame Caller's bowstring with her injured fingers. Rather than stopping halfway as she had up to that point, she drew the string as far back as it went, and the flame arrow generated burned with an almost terrifying power.

Even in the sights of the crimson inferno, the twin soldiers on the ground were unflinching, hands on the hilts of their swords. Most likely, they intended to continue to meet Maiden's normal and special attacks in kind. If they could continue to do that until Haruyuki's gauge was used up, and he could no longer fly, it would be their victory.

"Here I go," Utai murmured, and Haruyuki spread his wings as far as they would go in order to stabilize them in anticipation of the

activation of her special attack.

““Rangeless Scission!”” Cobalt and Manganese shouted in unison, fifty meters below.

An attack name.

But Utai hadn't fired her flame arrow yet—were they a step ahead? Or could it be...?

The two warriors were already drawing their blades in a perfectly synchronized motion. Blue light flashed, and then Haruyuki felt a wind colder than ice blow past both sides of his body.

Fwd. Their altitude dropped. Hurriedly, he tried to increase the thrust of his wings, but their gentle descent did not stop. Reflexively looking back, he saw two halves of his own silver wings reflect the evening sun as they fell soundlessly. Belatedly, his health gauge dropped over 20 percent.

They cut me?! But we're fifty meters apart?!

I know it's a special attack, but there's no way close-range sword users could have a gun's range...

And then, understanding, like an explosion of fireworks, pushed these dumbfounded thoughts out of his head. Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade: The twins were not true close-range blue; they were metal colors just like Silver Crow. Exceptional colors not constrained by the color wheel.

I should have known that. Gritting his teeth, Haruyuki pushed what remained of his metallic fins to full throttle and tried to stop their descent. He managed to get them hovering again, but his special-attack gauge was dropping with terrifying speed. It would last, at most, ten more seconds.

“Flame Vortex.”

Utai chanted the name in a calm and cool tone.

Krrr! The flames enveloping the arrow swelled up. Launched with an earsplitting roar was not an arrow, but rather a crimson helix of a great lance.

The warriors on the ground split up immediately and took evasive maneuvers just as the great lance hit the ground between them. The red, flaming vortex instantly swelled up over ten meters and swallowed the sisters.

The enemy health gauges in the top left of his field of view were dropping at exactly the same speed. They could not yet emerge from the flames because the vortex also had a magnetic pull. Wild waves rode through the grass around them, and chunks were pulled up and sucked into the flames to become sparks dancing upward.

In the old days, Ardor Maiden had regularly pulled off magnificent victories in the Territories when teamed up with Sky Raker, and this incredible technique made him vividly feel the reality

of that legend. And Utai had most certainly guessed that the twins' special attack was long-range. If only the knowledge that they were metal colors hadn't fallen out of his head, Haruyuki might have also realized this and evaded their slicing attack.

I'm still very much the forelock, he told himself as his special-attack gauge was depleted.

"We're going down!" Haruyuki started to glide unstably with what was left of his wings.

"Now the true contest begins." Utai's resolute voice reached his ears. "I'm counting on your determination, C!"

"R-roger!" he shouted, and landed outside the vortex of flames that was finally starting to die out. The twin soldiers appeared from beyond the white smoke that puffed upward, their armor charred. Given that they were metal colors, their heat resistance was high, and despite that they had taken Maiden's special attack full in the face, their health gauges were still at 40 percent.

Four eye lenses shone with a pale light, humming with vibration. Cobalt and Manganese wordlessly readied their swords, and Utai brought up her bow—and Haruyuki, his hands.

I'm still way behind in brains and technique. But I can't be beat for determination!! he shouted to himself through clenched teeth, kicking at the charred-black earth.

Fifteen minutes later.

Manganese Blade's downward slice quickly caught the right straight Haruyuki launched with the last of his strength. At the same time as his arm was cut away at the shoulder and sent flying, his bright-red health gauge fell to just 10 percent. When he lost his balance and fell into the grass, the tip of the greatsword was charged toward his neck.

Is this the end? Haruyuki waited for the final blow, but the sword dug into the earth a mere two centimeters from his face mask with *krnch*. Staring stunned at the pale metal before his eyes, he heard a voice from above.

"You gave me a decent fight, Silver Crow."

"Huh?" Haruyuki timidly lifted his head.

"It's not that I have taken pity on you." Manganese snorted as she yanked her blade out of the ground. "If this were a simple duel, I would have no mercy and take your head. But you came here for some purpose, yes? Something to do with our Leonids?"

"Oh. Th-that's right." Hurriedly pulling himself up, Haruyuki sent his gaze to his right as he knelt formally on the grass. The battle between Cobalt and Maiden seemed to be shifting in Maiden's favor, albeit slightly, but then they, too, stopped fighting.

“Um. Manga?” He looked up at Manganese once more. “I’m sorry, but could you give me a little time after this? I do have something important to talk to you about...”

“...Involving the Society?”

“Y-yes.”

The ponytailed warrior sheathed her sword as she glanced at her pigtailed sister. Apparently, that was enough to come to an understanding, and she nodded lightly. “No choice then. Crow, whereabouts are you now?”

It took him a moment or two to realize she was asking about his position in the real world. “Hyah?! Um. Sh-Shinoume Highway.”

“Mm. Well then.” She bent over and brought her face mask close to him before murmuring at a barely audible volume, “Come to the family restaurant at the five-way intersection in Nakano when you get back.”

“Hyah?! S-so then, you mean, in the real—?”

“You’re too loud,” she scolded quietly, then stood back up before surveying their surroundings. Sensing the end of the duel, the members of the Gallery were cheering and clapping loudly, but the female warrior merely shot them a sharp look. “It’s entirely possible a spy has slipped into the duel stage. We could forcibly eject the Gallery, but that also looks bad in its own way.”

“R-right. Well, true,” he agreed, “but if we’re meeting in the real, then we need to decide on a sign or something.”

“Mm. We are Burst Linkers. We will know each other at a glance.”

Wiiiiill weeee, thouuuuugh?

Although this doubt rose up from the bottom of his heart, Haruyuki could only nod.

The tag-team duel ended in a mutually agreed-upon draw, and the instant he burst out and returned to the bus in the real world, Haruyuki slid down into his seat. He held down the button on his Neurolinker to cut off his connection to the global net, while Utai, next to him, typed out her impression of the fight with a cool smile.

UI> JUST AS YOU'D EXPECT OF THE LEONIDS' DUALIS, THEY WERE VERY STRONG.

"They really were. That Rangeless Scission special attack has way too wide a field."

UI> IT'S MOST LIKELY THE SAME TYPE OF GUN PERFORMANCE AS TRILEAD'S SWORD. I SUSPECT THAT THE LONGER THE SWORDS ARE SHEATHED BEFORE THE SPECIAL ATTACK ACTIVATION, THE GREATER THE RANGE THEY CAN REACH.

"Oh. M-makes sense." Nodding, Haruyuki remembered the mysterious young male samurai they'd met in the Castle. He'd given his name as Trilead Tetroxide—or Azure Air—and was in possession of the straight sword that was the epsilon of the Seven Arcs, the Infinity. The special feature of this sword was that the longer it was left in its sheath, the greater the power of the blow after it was unsheathed.

So then, if things went wrong and one of the twins got ahold of the Infinity, the force and range of the special attack Rangeless Scission could easily be infinite if left sheathed long enough, a totally crushing technique.

Scary, so scary.

He was still shuddering as he heard a bell chime. Utai had touched the next-stop button in the AR display.

UI> NOW IS THE START OF TODAY'S REAL MISSION, ARITA.

"R-right. I hope we can actually find them," he said, worried.

UI> I'M SURE THEY ARE VERY SAMURAI-LIKE. NOW LET'S GET OFF THE BUS! Utai stood up without waiting for the bus to stop and moved toward the door.

Impressed at how she was always full of energy despite her small stature, Haruyuki followed the brown leather backpack.

They got off at the bus stop at the intersection of Shinoume Highway and Nakano Street and headed north on Nakano. After they had walked seven minutes, an orange sign came into view on the right, the family restaurant Coba-Manga had set as the meeting place. If they were simply going out to eat, they could have accessed the restaurant site beforehand and checked for open tables or made a reservation, but since they were meeting people whose faces and contact info were unknown to them, their only choice was to just go inside.

If Haruyuki had said he wasn't feeling a little awkward about this first meeting with the twins in the real, given that the flesh-and-bone body of Haruyuki Arita didn't resemble Silver Crow in any way, he would have been lying. But he told himself that now was not the time to be worrying about things like that and climbed the stairs to the restaurant.

When he pushed open the glass door, cool air-conditioning and a voice calling "welcome" greeted them. He told the waitress they were meeting someone and then stood up taller to look around the restaurant.

Since it was the inconspicuous time of four thirty, there weren't very many patrons. But all the ones he could see were housewives on their way home from shopping and businessmen on breaks; he couldn't spot anyone who seemed to be that particular pair. Or so he thought, but then a hand appeared from the other side of a smoked-glass partition that hid a table deeper inside, beckoning Haruyuki and Utai over.

"....."

He and Utai exchanged a look before timidly starting forward. He stopped in front of the partition and steadied his resolve before taking another step and turning ninety degrees to the right.

Two earlier arrivals were seated on one of the benches surrounding the table. Their sailor-style uniforms were a slightly bright navy blue with slender white ribbons, collars, and cuffs, a summery and refreshing color combination. Both Neurolinkers peeking over the collars were a deep-sapphire blue.

Haruyuki took in their outfits first and foremost not because he had a particular uniform fetish, but because he couldn't see their faces. It wasn't the angle—the two junior high school girls before him both had brown paper bags yanked over their heads.

"....."

He was at a loss for words. Utai moved her index fingers briskly, and a string of ellipses appeared in the chat window.

UI>

Finally, one of the paper bag people pointed wordlessly toward the opposite side of the table.

Haruyuki came to his senses and sat down, at any rate. When Utai took a seat next to him, the waitress brought over glasses of water and hot towels for them both and told them to press the button when they were ready to order. “Or you can order directly from the holomenu. Enjoy!”

She must have seriously strong nerves to maintain her smile, he thought.

But Haruyuki was very much unable to produce a smile himself. He simply stared hard at the paper bags across from him, his eyes wide. When he looked closely, he could see there were two small holes on each, so apparently, they could see him.

These paper bags—I mean, these people, are Manga and Coba...right? What's the point of the bags? Maybe they're on guard about having their identities discovered in the real, but it's pointless if they don't hide their uniforms, too. And anyway, they were the ones who suggested talking in the real...

His mind racing, he continued to stare, when the paper bag directly across from him brought her head over to the paper bag beside her.

“Hey. This is actually too weird.”

“You were the one who was worried about them seeing our faces, Yuki!”

“Aah! Don't say my name!”

“O-oops. Aah, come on. This is exhausting, okay?”

“This isn't my fault. Like, let's just take them off.”

“No choice, I guess. I mean, they've got their faces exposed and all.”

The pair apparently reached a consensus and grabbed the tops of their paper bags at the same time to yank them off, fortunately revealing the faces of real human beings.

They did, in fact, look very much alike—or rather, they were so identical that Haruyuki couldn't tell them apart. The defined eyebrows; the clear, crisp line of the nose; the classic Japanese features. Utai also had that kind of look, but she was cute, whereas the two girls in front of him were the very definition of beautiful. Neither was wearing anything in the way of accessories, so the only difference between them was that the one across from Haruyuki had her glossy hair pulled into a ponytail, while the one across from Utai was wearing hers in pigtails.

Seeing these hairstyles, Haruyuki was finally convinced that they were the ones he and Utai had come to see, and he bowed his head as he gave his name. “Um, nice to meet you. I'm Silv—I mean, Corvus. This is Shrine Maiden.”

Introduced with Haruyuki's impromptu fake name, Utai placed

her hands together in her lap and bowed deeply. Perhaps in reaction to the composure of this child of a Noh family, the pair in their sailor uniforms snapped to attention as they bowed.

He lifted his face, and Pigtales opened her mouth first. "I'm Koto Takanouchi. Ninth grade."

Followed by the Ponytail across from him: "Yuki Takanouchi. Same."

"Uh. Um." Haruyuki froze up again for a couple seconds before he hurried to ask, "Those names are your real...?"

"It's all the same once your face is out there!" The one with pigtales who'd given her name as Koto furrowed her brow. "Tell us your names, too."

"R-right. Um. I'm Haruyuki Arita. I'm in eighth grade."

They turned to Utai, but he quickly explained the situation and had them accept the chat app's ad hoc connection.

Utai immediately tapped at her holokeyboard. UI> MY NAME IS UTAI SHINOMIYA. I AM IN FOURTH GRADE.

Once they had introduced themselves with their real names, they all spontaneously bowed again.

It was the sound of Koto tapping an AR button on the table that broke the strange silence. She quickly scrolled through the holomenu displayed and opened the dessert page.

"Oh! You're gonna have dessert, Koto?"

"The fight was exhausting. I'm starving."

"No fair. I'm having some, too, then."

Listening to them bicker shook his conviction that they were, in fact, the Dualis of the Leonids, aka Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade. But considering their appearance and names, they were definitely twins, and their hairstyles were the same as in the Accelerated World. The twin-tailed Koto was likely Cobalt, while the single-tailed Yuki was Manganese. When he looked at them with those eyes, he could somehow see something sharp, reminiscent of soldiers, in their auras.

Anyway, I should order something, too. He shook his head, called up the menu himself, and flew to the dessert page. He moved it to a position so that Utai could see it as well and asked quietly, "What're you having, Shinomiya?"

UI> I WILL HAVE THE CREAM *ANMITSU*.

"Okay, then I'll get the double scoop of ice cream." He tapped the menu, and the Nega Nebulus order was completed in five seconds.

The Leonids team, however, still seemed to be undecided. They stared at the menu with serious expressions and then suddenly opened their mouths. "'Strawberry brûlée parfait.'"

Their harmony was exactly the same as during the duel, and he

felt a rush of admiration for this incredible duo, while, for some reason, the twins glared at each other.

“I said it first.”

“I was faster. You change your order, Koto.”

“Yuki, I changed mine last time. It’s your turn today.”

“Nuh-uh. I worked really hard in the duel today.”

“And yet, it was a real struggle against Crow, who’s a level lower.”

“What about *you*? You were beaten black-and-blue by Maiden, and she’s long-range.”

“Uh, um,” Haruyuki hurriedly interjected now that their avatar names were being tossed about. “That’s good there. Like, why do you have to change your order? Can’t you both have the strawberry parfait?”

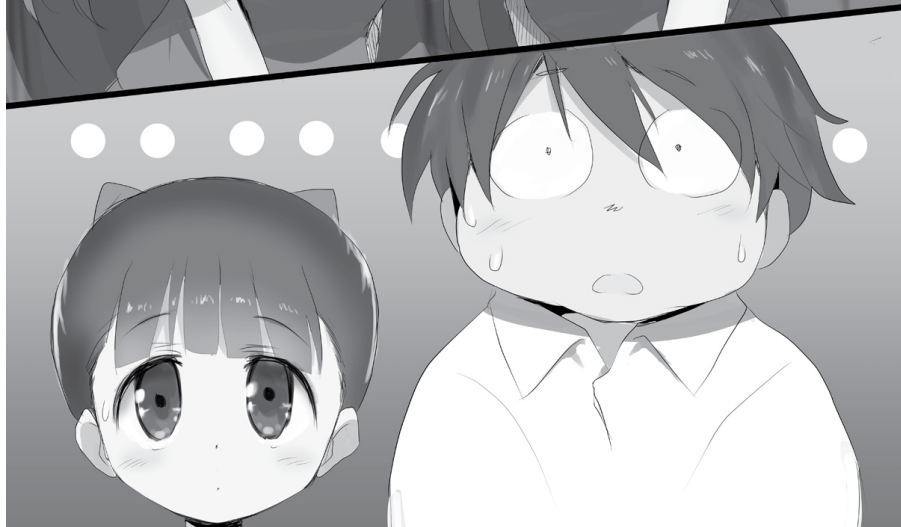
Now Koto (Cobalt) was glaring at him. “Yuki and I have a rule that we get different things and share.”

“Uh-huh. But if you’re going to share anyway, then does it matter who gets what?” he asked, and this time, Yuki (Manganese) rebutted him.

“It’s totally different. With the strawberry parfait, whoever eats it first gets the strawberry half on top!! From the middle down, I mean, it’s just ice cream and sherbet and cookie.”

“And if this is a yogurt parfait, then the bottom’s only yogurt and cereal. That stuff’s not a treat; it’s like a meal.”

“I—I see. I completely understand.” He raised his hand and bobbed his head.



Suddenly, Utai giggled, albeit in an extremely restrained way. Given that she had aphasia, it was quite unusual for her to laugh out loud, so he gasped unconsciously. Finally, she sent her fingers racing across the tabletop. UI> PLEASE EXCUSE ME. YOU'RE JUST SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT FROM HOW YOU ARE ON THE OTHER SIDE.

Reading this, Koto and Yuki looked slightly uncomfortable.

"That's how it is, though. I mean, Burst Linkers," Koto muttered.

Yuki smiled. "Just today, we could both order the same thing, right?"

"A celebration of meeting other people for the first time in the real."

The twins tapped the picture of the strawberry brûlée parfait at the same time and closed the menu.

As he brought the cold water in the glass to his mouth, Haruyuki considered the fact that both Koto and Yuki's Leonids and Great Wall from the battle three days earlier were technically Negabu's enemies. If they hadn't all had an overly powerful shared enemy like the Acceleration Research Society, they definitely wouldn't be able to meet and talk in the real like this.

Trial Number One, Accel Assault 2038, had fallen into ruin due to excessive fighting; Trial Number Three, Cosmos Corrupt, had also failed due to excessive harmony—or so said the White King. This was coming from their most powerful enemy, but as a gamer, he could get on board with what she was saying.

Trial Number Two, aka Brain Burst 2039, the version Haruyuki and his friends played, had been going for eight years, regardless of the activity of the Green King, because it somehow struck a balance—albeit an imperfect one—between fighting and harmony. This spontaneous meeting was perhaps a one-time miracle brought about by that precarious balance. The chance to meet Koto and Yuki Takanouchi in the real world might never come along again.

But even still, we can show our faces, name ourselves, and eat sweets together like this, so we're already friends. I want to believe that.

He watched as the faces of Koto and Yuki lit up when their enormous strawberry parfaits were brought to the table.

“So then, Coba and Manga agreed to take on the observer role on Saturday?” Chiyuri asked over the voice call.

“Yeah, basically,” Haruyuki replied. “They kept asking about the Metatron mission, though, which was some rough going. But they’ll be on standby at the Institute for Nature Study in Minato Number Three, and they said they’ll check the matching list as soon as the Territories are over.”

“Good. That’s great. Nice work on that mission, Haru. Now all we have to do is pray that at least one member of the Society is connected globally at that time.”

He nodded and set his arms on the balcony railing as he looked out in the direction of Koenji. The temperature didn’t drop that much even at night, but his condo was up high, so the breeze blowing past felt good. White headlights and red taillights flowed slowly down Kannana Street below his eyes. As he took in the flickering lights, he listed in his mind the known Acceleration Research Society members.

First, the president—the White King, White Cosmos. It was only natural for her name to be on the list in Minato, so that wouldn’t be any kind of proof.

Next was the vice president, the formidable Black Vise, who had pushed Haruyuki and his friends up against the wall any number of times. But given that there had been no instances of a double color name in the Accelerated World up to that point, the possibility remained that the name *Black Vise* was simply what he called himself. In that case, it wouldn’t show up on the list.

Then there was a similarly experienced veteran, the Quad Eyes Analyst, Argon Array. But only Haruyuki and his friends knew she was a member of the Society, and they didn’t have a shred of evidence to prove it. So her name was also weak in terms of evidential power.

In short, of the three members of the executive, only Black Vise had any possibility. Otherwise, all they could do was hope for lower-ranking members.

But they faced problems here, too. Dusk Taker had already lost all his points and retired, and Wolfram Cerberus was unprovable like

Argon Array, which just left Rust Jigsaw, who had charged into the Hermes' Cord race, and Sulfur Pot, whom Kuroyukihime had encountered in Okinawa. Pot, a veteran Burst Linker who had belonged to the Purple Legion in the past, would likely testify for them.

"In the end, only Vise, Jigsaw, or Pot will be any kind of proof," he muttered with a sigh.

"Yeah." Chiyuri also sighed heavily. *"If only we could get some evidence that Argon's a Society member."*

"Ash saw that time when Argon jumped into the Battle Royale in Suginami. She blew up his motorcycle with her lasers, so Ash knows she's not just some analyst. But even that isn't proof that she's an ally of the Society."

"And Ash's a member of GW."

"Yeah..."

They sighed together once again.

If there was actually some way to prove Argon Array was a Society member, Kuroyukihime or Fuko would have come up with it a long time ago. This wasn't a nut Haruyuki and Chiyuri could crack at this stage.

"Mm!" Chiyuri shouted on the other end of the line, as if switching gears, and continued in a slightly cheerier voice. "So anyway, did you decide what to take as your level-six bonus?"

"Oh. No, not yet. The more I think about it, the harder it is to decide..."

"Ha-ha-ha! I figured. But the Territories on Saturday are gonna be way fiercer than the fight against Great Wall the other day, so better to have all the weapons we can."

"I guess you're right." Haruyuki nodded deeply at Chiyuri's warm advice.

It was important to select a level-up bonus after careful examination of his actual needs over the course of countless duels, but during this investigatory period, he was denying himself a considerable boost in power. It would be his Legion comrades paying the price for that. This kind of softness would not be allowed in the fight against the Oscillatory Universe.

"I'll definitely decide before the Territories," he announced firmly.

"Level six is still a little far-off for me," an equally serious voice chimed in. *"But I'll fight hard on Saturday, too."*

"Yeah, I'm counting on it. How much longer 'til you hit it?"

"I only just went up to five a little while ago. So a lot further still."

"Huh. Okay, so let's invite Taku and go Enemy hunting now," Haruyuki proposed enthusiastically. "We might get one that G—I mean, we might get someone the Green King fed points to."

"No way!" Chiyuri immediately rejected the idea. *"You already fought in Naka-two today! Go to bed early tonight!"*

He frowned slightly. But Chiyuri wasn't done lecturing.

"And, Haru, there's one other thing you have to decide before the Territories on Saturday, isn't there?"

"Huh? Th-there is?"

"Don't tell me you forgot!"

Just as his childhood friend was on the verge of sending a lightning bolt to strike him, he remembered the critical matter unrelated to the Accelerated World and shook his head furiously. "Oh! No! I didn't forget. I didn't! The student council election, right?"

"Right. So what're you going to do?"

Haruyuki turned around and leaned back against the balcony railing. Last week, eighth-grade class C representative Mayu Ikuzawa invited him to stand in the next-term student council election. He said he'd give her an answer this week, so just as Chiyuri said, he would have to make a decision before Saturday.

"What'd Taku say?" Takumu had also been invited to run, and Haruyuki thought Chiyuri might know his plans.

But her answer was the same. *"No way! Ask Taku about Taku if you want to know!"*

"R-right."

"Oh! Mom says I should hurry up and get in the bath, so I gotta go, okay? G'night, Haru. See you tomorrow."

"Uh-huh. See you tomorrow. 'Night, Chiyu." He disconnected the voice call and let out a long breath as he looked up at the summer's night sky from under the balcony. The sky, lit up by the illumination of the city center, was gray, but even so, several stars shone in silent splendor. He admired them for a while before stretching and going back inside.

The time was nine thirty. His mother still hadn't come home. He would have to talk to her soon about the trip with his friends to his grandparents' house in Yamagata over summer break, but their lives had as little overlap as usual. Not long ago, when he'd stayed up until she got home to show her the results of his final exams, she only said, "Work hard for next time, too."

Well, at least it was "next time, too" and not just "next time." Finding solace in the distinction, he tumbled into bed.

What would his mother say if he did decide to run for student council? Would she root for him? Tell him to give it up? Or just say he should do what he wanted?

From what he'd heard from his grandparents in Yamagata, his mother had also been involved in student council during her school days. He was curious to know what on earth had made her run for

council, but she'd probably just be annoyed if he asked her. And wanting his mother's attention was not a good reason to decide to try for a council position.

Mayu Ikuzawa said her reason for running in the election was because she admired the current council vice president Kuroyukihime, so she wanted to try to get just a little closer to emulating her. He could totally understand that feeling, but that was Ikuzawa's motivation and not Haruyuki's. If he was going to run, he had to find the reason for it and his own objectives within himself.

So what's my goal then? he wondered idly, staring up at the gloomy ceiling.

If it was about his goal as a Burst Linker, he had an immediate answer: reach the ending of Brain Burst with Kuroyukihime. He didn't know if the road that led there was Kuroyukihime reaching level ten or undoing the seal on the final Arc in the Castle, The Fluctuating Light. But Haruyuki believed that if he kept fighting alongside Kuroyukihime, the end of the game would come at some point, and all its mysteries would be revealed.

But what goal did real-world Haruyuki Arita have as he lived his daily life?

Back when he was being bullied by a group of hoodlum students, simply going to school every day had been an almost unendurable torment. But Kuroyukihime had saved him, and now he even had people in his life he thought of as friends. It was no longer a struggle to get up in the morning or walk down the road to school.

But given precisely that, when he asked himself if he was fighting for something now, he couldn't say yes right away. He wasn't burning with passion for a sport the way Takumu and Chiyuri were. He definitely couldn't say he was studying hard. And while he was serious about his work in the Animal Care Club, he was actually only Utai's assistant.

If he cut away all the things connected with the Accelerated World, maybe the current Haruyuki was just passing the days aimlessly. He was simply staring at the days sliding by, with no vision for the future, and no goals for the next month or half a year, much less after graduation.

Was it a lie when I said I wanted to go to the same high school as Kuroyukihime?

This seed of doubt caught him off guard, and Haruyuki turned toward the wall and hugged his knees as it took root. A gloomy voice in his head responded:

It wasn't a lie. But...some dreams just don't come true, no matter how hard you try.

Effort without results is meaningless. Is that it?

Exactly. I mean, who's going to high-five you for something like that? No one's going to tell me how great I am if I fail the entrance exam, no matter how hard I studied. And if I run for council and lose, I'll be miserable and pathetic. Are you trying to tell me there's some kind of meaning in that?

Haruyuki interrogated himself, sinking into a thick swamp of misery.

But suddenly, in the back of his mind, a refreshing breeze blew. Something Kuroyukihime had said to him a few days earlier was replayed with a deep echo. *"Is there any meaning in work without results...? That's what you're thinking right now, yes?"*

His eyes flew open, and he stretched out his curled-up body. He spread his arms and legs on top of the bed and took a deep breath, then exhaled.

When Kuroyukihime had posed this question, Haruyuki hadn't been able to say it, but he had indeed felt his answer was no. If you fought, something of that had to remain inside you.

He wanted people to say nice things about him. He didn't want to be laughed at and he didn't want to feel small. There was something more important than such small motivations. These wouldn't change the Accelerated World or the real world. To fight for himself, for the sake of someone else. To fight because you just wanted to fight. The memories of having done that would gradually build up and someday become incredible power.

"Aaall right!" Haruyuki thrust his hands out toward the ceiling and clenched them into tight fists.

He brought one hand down and manipulated his virtual desktop with the index finger of the other. He sent a short message to the person at the top of his contacts list and got a swift reply. He quickly switched the settings on his home server and murmured a command.

"Direct Link."

Now a pink pig avatar, Haruyuki touched down on a terrace jutting out from the tower of a European-style castle. A chain of snowcapped mountains rose up in the distance, and the railing was cut into a cliff so high up he couldn't see the bottom. A small table, two chairs, and a tea set had been arranged on the terrace, the full-dive environment data he'd downloaded from overseas a little while ago.

A few seconds later, he heard the tinkling of bells on the edge of the terrace, and a slender human figure appeared, a beautiful fairylike avatar in a long black dress with black spangle butterfly wings on her back.

"Sorry for the wait, Haruyuki. As in love with heights as always, I see," Kuroyukihime remarked as she looked out at the scene.

“Good evening, Kuroyukihime.” Haruyuki scratched his head with one hoofed hand as he greeted her. “I’m sorry for calling you all of a sudden.”

“No, I was due for a break anyway.”

“Were you studying?”

“Well, you could call it studying. I was compiling all the information we have about Oscillatory Universe. I’ll send the file when I’m finished, so be sure to study it.”

“Oh! That’s really helpful. Thank you. Please, have a seat.” He urged her toward the white wooden chair, and Kuroyukihime obediently sat down. He took the chair opposite and was about to pour the tea when a pale hand checked him.

“.....?”

“Is the tea the environment data default flavor?”

“Y-yes, it is.”

“Then perhaps you wouldn’t mind trying something I put together recently? I’m a little bit proud of it.”

“Of course. That would be great!” He offered her the white porcelain teapot, and Kuroyukihime tapped the lid with her fingertip, pulled up the control window, and loaded a new flavor. Then she held the pot up high and poured a narrow stream into the two cups without spilling a drop.

“Here we are.” Kuroyukihime placed a cup in front of him, and he picked it up and thanked her before taking a sip. A luxurious flavor like a brandy cake with fruit filled his mouth, but when he swallowed, it disappeared, nothing more than a fleeting moment. All that lingered in the aftertaste was the faint aroma of refreshing mint.

“Whoa,” Haruyuki said. “This is delicious. It’s like a cake or something.”

Kuroyukihime grinned. “The cakes Petit Paquet made for us were so good, well, I was a little inspired. But I can only really fiddle with the parameters of the virtual tea.”

“That’s amazing. I’m sure Chocolat and the others would be super-happy to try your tea.”

“Well then, should the opportunity present itself, I’ll serve it to them, too.”

Although Haruyuki savored the tea carefully, he soon drained his cup. When he did, a small black butterfly fluttered up from the bottom and cut in front of him.

“Ah...Ahh!” Momentarily stunned, he tried to catch it, but his short pig avatar arms swung through the air, and the butterfly flew off away from the terrace. “Aww. I never dreamed you’d incorporate butterfly points into the tea.”

“Hee-hee. Never let your guard down. How about a refill?”

“With pleasure!”

“The butterfly comes out or doesn’t at random, though,” she said with a straight face as she poured the tea with tremendous skill once more.

Ruby-red liquid rippling in his cup, Haruyuki looked up again at the blue sky into which the black butterfly had flown off. “Um, Kuroyukihime?”

“Mm. What is it?”

“Um. I think I’m going to do it. Run for student council, I mean...”

Kuroyukihime burst into a wide smile and then nodded once, twice, her black eyes trained on Haruyuki. “You are? I’m glad to hear it. Just let me know if there’s anything I can do. Of course, I can’t do anything fraudulent, but I won’t begrudge you any honest help.”

“Okay, I appreciate that! So I actually wanted to ask you...”

She encouraged him with a gesture. “Go ahead.”

“Um.” Haruyuki wriggled his pig nose as he began awkwardly. “Okay, right. I know this is kinda curious when I said I was gonna run. But I don’t have any kind of vision or anything, like I want to change Umesato *like this* or make *whatever* better. Like, at the school festival, you said you increased the number of social cameras in the school so there were no more blind spots. That was superhard, wasn’t it?”

“Mm. Well, it took a bit of work.” With a faint wry smile, Kuroyukihime wet her lips with tea before continuing. “I put in reports all over the place with the school administration, the corporate owner, the ward, the city, but it definitely wasn’t painful. It was something I wanted to make happen, whatever I had to do.”

“I still haven’t found that something that I want to make happen, that thing I just *have* to do. I don’t know if I should really run when I’m still so unsure like that.”

“It’s fine,” she responded immediately, standing up. High heels clacking against the stone floor, she walked to the edge of the terrace and looked at the mountains off in the distance. The gentle sunlight caught her spangle butterfly wings and made the rose-red pattern glitter.

“Listen, Haruyuki. We’re still young. We’re only just starting to walk on our own two feet, see with our own eyes, think with our own brains. We do what we want to do; we do what we can do; we do what should move us forward...The roads stretch out in all directions. If you curl up in one place and plug your eyes and ears, you can’t go anywhere; if you start to walk, the road will most certainly open up before you. It’s all right. I’m sure you’ll find it as I did—whatever objective it is that you want to realize as a member of the student council.”

Haruyuki also jumped down from his chair and moved to her side.

But his avatar was too short, and his face didn't come up above the railing. *Crap, I should've at least tinkered with this bit.*

And then Kuroyukihime crouched down and picked up his pig avatar.

"Ah, gah!" He panicked, but she pulled him close to her chest regardless.

As she brought his round head up against her cheek, Kuroyukihime murmured heavily, "I'm graduating from Umesato in eight months."

".....!!"

The instant he heard this, his pig avatar stiffened, reflecting his mental agitation.

Kuroyukihime gently stroked his back with one hand. "My family has been told that I want to go to high school in Suginami. But this is not something I alone can decide. It's possible they'll use my graduation as an opportunity to send me even farther away."

"Do you mean...somewhere...outside Tokyo?" He somehow managed to ask the question, albeit in a shaky voice, but the answer shocked him even further.

"Or outside of Japan, perhaps."

"Ngh! I-if that happens, then...!"

"Mm. If I'm not connected with the social camera network, I won't be able to accelerate. Which would be the same as no longer being a Burst Linker." Kuroyukihime's voice was utterly calm. Most likely, this was not something that had only come up the day before. As she caressed Haruyuki's avatar, she continued.

"Of course, nothing's set in stone yet. But if, hypothetically, I was forced to study abroad, the deadline for applications is October. So that is when I will find out the conclusion to all this. I'm exerting maximal effort to ensure my wishes are respected but...I'm sorry, I can't make any promises." Her voice had been calm, but now, at the last second alone, it trembled slightly.

Haruyuki unconsciously clung to her slender avatar as hundreds of chaotic thoughts raced through his mind.

No. I don't want that. I haven't even started to work on going to the same high school as Kuroyukihime. I used the idea that it would be impossible as an excuse, averted my eyes since it was still so far in the future. But now I'm finally ready to try moving forward. And yet...

"Kuroyukihime... If...? What if...?" Haruyuki managed to squeeze out, before desperately swallowing his words. He couldn't say the rest. If she swore allegiance to her sister—to the White King—and helped her achieve her objective, then she could get her to persuade their parents not to send her abroad. But he couldn't say that. He closed his eyes tightly and gritted his teeth.

"It's all right." He heard a gentle voice beside him. "Don't worry."

"Huh?" Opening his eyes again, he saw Kuroyukihime's smile.

"Whatever happens, the bond between us isn't changing. Even if I end up leaving Japan, we can meet anytime we want in a full dive like this. I am a Burst Linker, I am your parent, and you are my child, but that is not the only bond connecting us. Even if we are separated by physical distance, or we both are no longer Burst Linkers..."

She paused briefly before starting to speak again, choosing her words very carefully. "I promise you. I will be by your side. Forever and into the future."

Instantly, a powerful electric jolt pierced Haruyuki's body. This wasn't the first time he'd heard these words. Kuroyukihime had announced the same thing, word for word, after the battle with Dusk Taker three months earlier.

"Kuroyuki...hime..." His hoarse voice trembling, Haruyuki pressed his avatar face tightly against Kuroyukihime's chest.

What if she couldn't escape going abroad to study, and her Brain Burst effectively ended next March? What was there that Haruyuki could do before then?

It was obvious. He could see her to the end of the Accelerated World. The system message to those who reached level nine had informed them that Burst Linkers who got to level ten would meet the developer and learn the real meaning and ultimate objective of Brain Burst. He would find the truth of this message with her.

But to reach level ten, Kuroyukihime had to take the heads of four other kings. That was a path of carnage, drenched in blood. Even if, hypothetically, she did defeat the White King at the end of the decisive battle against Oscillatory Universe set to open in three days, she would still be a long way from clearing that condition.

And...

...recently, Haruyuki had started to feel something that was hard to explain even to himself. If this was a game, then trying to beat it was only natural. He'd said this to Kuroyukihime before, and it was no lie. But through his interactions with the Six Armors of the Great Wall and the Dualis of the Leonids, he had grown reluctant about the idea of a bloody massacre with them over a simple duel.

Kuroyukihime couldn't get to level ten by taking the head of the Green or Blue King. But once she set out on that path to rule, the modest fellowship he felt between himself and Koto and Yuki Takanouchi a mere five hours earlier would be shattered without question. And anger and hatred, fist and sword would take its place.

That was the future of the game Brain Burst. The developer had set it up like that. If they had their sights set on clearing the game, then that was a path they would have to go down at some point.

But.

But...

As he took in the hazy warmth and softness transmitted to him from Kuroyukihime's avatar, Haruyuki had the sensation of his self being ripped in two.

It was at that moment. The thought he'd had before he sent Kuroyukihime that e-mail became a tiny spark and flamed back to life.

There might be another path. Unlike the level ten stated in the system message, there was no evidence for it, so this was nothing more than a simple hypothesis. But it was also the path that the members of the first Nega Nebulus had tried to walk down three years earlier for the sake of their beloved Legion Master.

"Kuroyukihime," Haruyuki said, the slightest bit of force in his voice. "I...I'm going to fight. For my own sake. And for yours, I'm going to do everything I can. So... So..."

The rest wouldn't take shape in words. But Kuroyukihime tightened her arms around his avatar.

"Mm. I'll fight, too. I'll expend every effort so I am able to keep walking together with you forever."

“It’s been quite some time since you and I got to talk just the two of us, hmm, Corvus?” Fuko Kurasaki said as she came into the living room, smiling gently. “And that you would invite me over to your house alone. I’m looking forward to hearing this story of yours.”

“Uh. Um. P-please have a seat there. I’ll bring something to drink.” Haruyuki awkwardly indicated the sofa before scurrying into the kitchen. He poured chilled green tea into two tea bowls, set them on a tray, and carried them out.

He placed the tea before Fuko, who was sitting on the window side of the love seat, and then set himself down across from her on the chair and took a deep breath.

Three months had passed since he met Fuko, but he always got a little nervous when it was just the two of them. Perhaps it was the memory of her pushing him off the top of the old Tokyo Tower right after their first meeting, but ever since then, he couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by her presence.

It wasn’t just external factors like her beauty, on par with that of Kuroyukihime, or her proportions and their secret destructive power. It wasn’t her abilities as a Burst Linker, either, the source of many legends in the Accelerated World. It was the way she could contain all this and more.

In fact, as the Submaster, Fuko was the central pillar supporting the current Nega Nebulus. He didn’t need to go so far as to remember what a huge role she’d played in the final stages of the battle with Great Wall the other day; there was no doubt that everyone in the Legion felt like as long as they had “Strong Arm” Raker with them, they’d be all right. Given how they all relied on her, Haruyuki always ended up being stiffly respectful when they were alone together, but today he had to ask this very Fuko for an outrageous favor.

“This tea is quite good.”

Fuko’s words brought Haruyuki back to himself with a gasp. “Thank you. My mother hates bottled tea, so we always make chilled tea in the summer.”

“Are you the one who does that, Corvus?”

“Oh, well, basically,” he said. “Although, all I do is put tea leaves in the bag and then fill a glass container with water.”

“But it takes time, doesn’t it? And that time gives it a sweetness. It’s very good,” Fuko said as she drained her cup. Haruyuki started to stand up to pour her another, but she raised a hand to stop him. “Thanks, but that can wait. First, please tell me what you wanted to talk about.”

“Right.” Haruyuki resettled himself on the sofa.

Thursday, July 18th. With the closing ceremony for the first term and the decisive battle with White closing in two days out, Haruyuki had gotten in touch with Fuko and asked her to come over after school. She had readily agreed, and he’d gone to meet her at the bus stop on Kannana to show her to his house, but he still couldn’t really put together the words to express the throbbing that had started in the depths of his heart the previous day.

“Um. That’s...” He sat up straight and clasped his hands above his knees, then acknowledged to himself that there was no other way than to dive right in. He bowed his head deeply. “Master, I have a favor to ask!”

“And what would that be?”

He felt sure that even his master would be surprised or angry as he lifted his face and shouted, “Please loan me Gale Thruster just one more time!”

“Sure.” Fuko answered immediately, a smile on her face, neither angry nor surprised, and Haruyuki was the one left stunned.

“...Huh? Um. A-are you sure?”

“Of course. I just want you to tell me why.”

“Of course! ...But you might get angry.” Haruyuki took a gulp of chilled tea to calm himself and then looked straight into Fuko’s eyes, clear and deep like the stratosphere. “I actually want to go to the Castle again.”

This time, her eyes did grow round in surprise.

It took around ten minutes to explain his motivations in detail.

There was the fact that Kuroyukihime might go far away after graduating from Umesato. And that, if possible, he’d like to reach the ending of Brain Burst before then. And to that end, he wanted to investigate in detail The Fluctuating Light, thought to be one condition to clearing the game.

“I see. So that’s what’s going on...” Leaning back on the sofa, Fuko turned her gaze to the window.

The Arita living room faced south, so the Castle, which was due east, wasn’t visible from there. But Fuko narrowed her eyes as though she could see a vision of the enormous, impenetrable structure

beneath the summer sky and its gradation from navy to gold.

“The only Burst Linkers in Nega Nebulus to ever enter the Castle and come back alive are you and Maiden, Corvus,” she deliberated quietly. “If you can do it once, you can do it again. I’m sure that’s what you’re thinking. But the Castle and the Four Gods are no joke. You run a real risk of being trapped in an Unlimited EK.”

“I know.”

Her tone was soft, but her words held weight, and all Haruyuki could do was agree. But he hadn’t expected her to accept the idea right from the start, so he tried desperately to put into words the things he’d spent the whole day thinking about. “But...from my experience getting into the Castle the last time, if I charge into the altar area at super-high-speed without trying to fight the God, I think I could reach the gates. My flight speed’s gone up a fair bit since last time.”

“I see. But if I recall correctly, the gate didn’t open just because you reached it, yes? The door is sealed from the inside, is it not?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right.” He nodded his assent, admiring Fuko’s powers of recollection.

The gates of the Four Gods that stood to the north, east, south, and west of the Castle were all sealed by a plate with a carved relief of their respective guardian beasts. If a Burst Linker defeated the guardian, the seal would also break, and the door could be opened. But the last time, the south Suzaku gate had opened at the mere *approach* of Haruyuki and Utai. And that was because the mysterious young samurai Trilead Tetroxide had destroyed the plate from the inside.

The plate regenerated each time the gate opened and closed. The southern gate plate Lead destroyed with the Arc of Infinity and the Incarnate technique Heavenly Stratus would have returned the moment Haruyuki escaped.

“When we left the Castle, I promised Lead I’d be back. So I’m sure he broke the seal plates for me again. On all four gates.”

“.....”

Fuko furrowed her brow and crossed her right leg over her left. Underneath her thin tights, her legs were composed of bionanopolymer skin, biometal fiber muscles, and titanium alloy bones—and had lines so lovely and complex it was hard to believe they were artificial. He watched wordlessly as her slender fingers stroked the area around her knees where the servo motors were housed. “And if the gate doesn’t open?”

Haruyuki blinked rapidly a few times before hurrying to answer. “R-right. In that case, I’ll do a sudden vertical ascent in front of the gate, spin around, and escape.”

"I see." Fuko fell silent once again. Perhaps reflecting the speed of her thoughts, the tips of the toes on her right foot carved out an incremental rhythm in the air, and a faint engine sound stroked Haruyuki's eardrums with each tap.

After a full two minutes, Fuko lowered her right leg to the floor, fixed her long, straight hair with both hands, and then smiled directly at Haruyuki. "In the end, it comes down to whether you believe or you don't, hmm?"

"Huh?"

"Corvus, you believe in Trilead, right? You believe he would overcome great difficulties to break all the seals just to meet in the Castle again?"

"Yes." He nodded without the slightest hesitation.

Fuko returned the nod. "And Trilead believes in you. That you'll come see him again, even if it means courting the risk of Unlimited EK. In which case...I shall also believe in the Corvus who believes in Trilead."

"Huh?" Haruyuki asked, unconsciously leaning forward. "S-so then, you'll lend me Gale Thruster?!"

Fuko leaned forward as well and just barely poked at Haruyuki's cheek with the outstretched index finger of her right hand. "I said yes right from the start, didn't I? I was undecided about another matter."

"Huh? Wh-what does that mean?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" With the smile full of affection that Haruyuki had dubbed Vacuum Smashing Raker Smile rising up on her face, Fuko declared in a tone that promised to brook no objection, "I will come, too. I will lend you Gale Thruster together with the Sky Raker package."

"Wh-whaaaat?!"

"Listen, Corvus. Anyone planning to go alone into the Castle without talking to anyone else has no right to be *that* surprised."

"W-well, I guess that's true, but..." Haruyuki twisted his index fingers together, and Fuko's smile took on a hint of bitterness.

"Well, it's not that I don't understand how you feel." She shrugged lightly. "You can't tell Sacchi, and if you said anything to Uiui or Akira, or Chiiko or Mayuzumi, they'd obviously all say they would come, too."

"Yeah. They totally would. But if things go wrong, there's the risk of Unlimited EK..."

"You're not exempt from that, though?" She stared at him, her smile vanishing.

Haruyuki shook his head, both hands on his knees. "No, I'm definitely going to the Castle and coming back."

The smile returned to Fuko's face, and she nodded deeply.

It took them about ten minutes to rehydrate, take turns using the washroom, sit down beside each other on the love seat, and set the automatic disconnect safety.

“Um, so I’ll put the circuit disconnection for seven seconds from now in real-world time.”

“That’s about right. Inside, that’ll be one hour, fifty-six minutes, and forty seconds. Even if we do end up in Unlimited EK, we’ll die, at most, twice.”

“No, let’s make that zero!” Haruyuki declared, connecting the XSB cables stretching out from his and Fuko’s Neurolinkers to the network terminal of his home server. He checked that the global connection icon flashed again and then glanced at Fuko, sitting to his right. He wanted to apologize for having dragged her into this plan of his, but before he could, she squeezed his hand.

“Corvus, I’m going because I want to. Now then, countdown, please.”

“Okay!” He manipulated a holowindow with one hand and brought his finger toward the OK button of the other, which was set to cut off their global connection in twelve seconds. Like that, Haruyuki took a deep breath. “We dive on the count of five.”

He pressed the button and started the count.

“Five, four, three, two, one...”

““Unlimited Burst!””

Night. The enormous full moon, motionless in the center of the heavens, illuminated the earth with a pale light. The buildings had all been transformed into chalky gothic structures and cast black shadows on roads made up of packed white sand.

“That was a close call,” Sky Raker murmured as she looked up at the stars shining delicately in the night sky.

Haruyuki bobbed his head in agreement. “No kidding. For a second, I was wondering what we’d do if we got the Space stage.”

Silver Crow couldn’t fly in space since there was no air, so all they could have done was wait for the automatic disconnect and then dive again, spending another ten points. Fortunately, however, this was not a Space stage, but rather Moonlight. It was lovely to behold, and there were no troublesome terrain effects. The special feature of the Moonlight stage was that sound traveled long distances, there were few Enemies, and it was extremely dark in the shadows, making ambushes easier.

“But I did sort of want to see what the Enemies are like in the Space stage,” Raker finished, turning around.

“I—I don’t.” Haruyuki shook his head in a panic. “They’ll definitely be some kind of creepy space creatures.”

“Oh my! They might be cool space *kaiju*, you know? The kind they fight with Mobile Suits, or something.”

“Makes sense. In that case, I guess...”

“I was thinking that might be the case, but you know, something more alien-y would be more atmospheric. Parasitizing, vomiting acid, stuff like that.”

“Urgh. Spare me the acid.” Shaking his head once more, he glanced over at Raker.

She was in her usual white hat and dress, but her wheelchair hadn’t been summoned. Her high-heeled feet were firmly planted on the roof of the condo, and the evening breeze made her bluish-silver hair dance.

“Listen, Corvus.” Fuko dropped her voice slightly, so Haruyuki took a step closer. Looking down on the silent ivory-white town, Fuko

began to speak slowly. "I also heard more or less about Sacchi's situation. Naturally, I don't want to part from her, either. In fact, I even invited her to take the exam for my high school any number of times. Unfortunately, I couldn't get her to agree."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Perhaps because it's a girls' school," Fuko replied, smirking briefly at Haruyuki's bafflement before turning her madder-red eye lenses up toward the full moon above.

"When I learned that there was the possibility we would end up far apart...all I could think about was how to keep things the way they are. Just between us, I even thought about how Sacchi might stay with us in Tokyo if the issue with the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society dragged on for a long time... But you were different, hmm, Corvus? You decided that if your time was limited, you wanted to take Sacchi as far as you could go. Until the end of the infinite time flowing in the Accelerated World." Fuko's gentle, rich intonation hid a hint of sadness.

"No." Haruyuki shook his head any number of times. "I'm the same. I mean, I want to be with Kuroyukihime forever. I don't want her to go far away. But...when she first told me about the old days, I said to her, 'If Brain Burst's a game, then it's only natural to try to clear it.' I don't want to make those words a lie. That's why...I..." Here, he choked up.

"It's all right." Fuko wrapped her arms around him gently. "You'll find a path forward as long as you keep looking for it and pushing ahead. Your efforts definitely won't be in vain. I'll lend you whatever modest strength I might have. For Sacchi's sake, for the Legion's...and for yours as well, Corvus. Now...Shall we go to the Castle?"

Having smashed the walls and beams of his own condo to charge his special-attack gauge, Haruyuki flew off the highest floor with Fuko tucked under his arm.

He headed east, gliding occasionally to conserve energy. Once they passed Nakano, the skyscrapers of west Shinjuku appeared ahead of them. He slipped through the tips of the shining towers bathed in the moonlight, crossed the Yamanote line, and flew on, looking at the vast expanse of Shinjuku Gyoen to his right.

Finally, an incredibly massive structure came into view off in the distance. A snow-white palace surrounded by a pitch-black, bottomless gorge. Dreamily beautiful, nightmarishly frightening, the furthest end of the Accelerated World, which sat right at its center.

In the sky above the ravine, a perfect circle five hundred meters across, there was an invisible boundary wall of supergravity at all times that permitted no flight to the other side. The only roads across

the valley and into the castle were the large bridges to the north, east, south, and west, and the main gates that soared up on the other side of them.

Fuko stared for a while at the Castle that slept protected by these four gates, and then looked up at Haruyuki abruptly. "Have you decided which gate to charge yet?"

"Oh. Yes." He nodded and gained a little altitude. "At first, I thought about going in through the north gate, since I'd heard that Genbu is the only one of the Four Gods that doesn't fly."

"That is exactly right," Fuko agreed.

"But there's kind of a problem in terms of terrain with the north and east gates, and the west gate, too." Haruyuki hovered for a moment at an altitude from which all four gates were visible and explained to Fuko what he'd spent a full day thinking about.

The north gate of the castle, guarded by the God Genbu, was called Inuimon in the real world. Likewise, Seiryu's eastern gate was Sakashitamon, Suzaku's southern gate was Sakuradamon, and Byakko's western gate was Hanzomon, all of which had their defenses. The roads before the gates at Inuimon, Sakashitamon, and Hanzomon all had serious bends in them and didn't lead directly to the building, so their prospects there weren't good.

But at Sakuradamon, Sakurada Avenue stretched out from the foot of the bridge to the intersection at Azabudai Itchome in basically a straight line for about 2.2 kilometers. His previous approach run had been about two hundred meters, so this was, in fact, eleven times longer.

"I'm going to accelerate as much as I can again before charging into the God's pop area—the bridge in front of the gate. But since my flying power's gone up at least a little since last time, I want to get the biggest preliminary boost possible."

"I see," Fuko said. "That means the south gate is optimal, hmm?"

"Yes. What do you think, Master?" Haruyuki asked.

Fuko thought a bit. "The Four Gods all have their own characteristic abilities. Genbu has gravity attacks, Seiryu has Level Drain, Byakko has quick movement, Suzaku, flight and fire. They are all fearsome powers, but I think that your flight ability is actually least compatible with Byakko and Suzaku. Byakko can move so fast, it's like teleporting. Slipping through its claws would be a near-impossible task. And charging Suzaku's Flame Breath head-on would be extremely reckless."

"Right." Haruyuki nodded, remembering the mission to rescue Ardor Maiden on June 18th, exactly a month earlier.

Using Fuko's Gale Thruster as a booster, Haruyuki had shot across the large bridge, and the reason he hadn't been hit with the God

Suzaku's Flame Breath was because Kuroyukihime had made herself a target with her Incarnate technique Vorpal Strike. But this time, they would have no comrades to cover them. He and Fuko had to somehow reach the gate alone.

"Last time, it was about three seconds from the time Kuroyukihime charged onto the bridge until Suzaku finished appearing. If we can break through the five hundred meters of the bridge in those three seconds, we won't be attacked by Suzaku."

"I see. Five hundred meters in three seconds. So that means a speed of six hundred kilometers per hour, hmm?" Fuko nodded, showing off her impressive mental calculation abilities.

"That's...right," he answered, catching up. "My flying ability alone has a maximum speed of five hundred kilometers, and if I use my Incarnate technique Light Speed, I can get up to a thousand kilometers. If we add your Gale Thruster to that, Master, I think we can surpass the speed of sound—twelve hundred kilometers per hour."

"But we need to factor in our combined weight and the air resistance as well. If we assume our speed is halved to simplify the calculation, then we'll just barely be able to do six hundred kilometers per hour. But I'm not going to let you go alone just because of this, you know?" Fuko said, as if in warning.

"R-right. I know." He bobbed his head. "Actually, there's a possibility we could add some speed. But it's a bit of a wild card."

"Mm-hmm?" Fuko cocked her head to one side.

"Um, I'll explain in detail once we reach the takeoff point!" Haruyuki said, starting to move again.

He took off to the southeast, heading around Yotsuya, and flew with the Castle in sight on his left. They passed the government buildings of Nagatacho, now transformed into solemn temples, and after they slipped through the luxurious mansions from Akasaka to Roppongi, their target, Azabudai Itchome, came into view.

Haruyuki landed in the center of the wide intersection and gently set Fuko down on the ground. They stared silently at Sakurada Avenue, stretching out toward the north. Off in the distance down the 2.2 kilometers of road and five hundred meters of bridge beyond that, he could faintly make out the silhouette of the Castle.

"So then, what exactly is this possibility you mentioned?" Fuko turned her gaze back toward him.

Haruyuki cleared his throat. "Right. Okay, well anyway, I'll try calling her." He closed his eyes beneath his goggles and focused his mind.

He called her through the fine link that stretched from him in the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field to the Highest Level, the very top world.

Can you hear me? I need your help. If you can hear my voice, could you please show yourself...?

Rrrrring! The core of his duel avatar resonated with a bell ringing, fell in tune with it, and finally, the sound melted into him, and he could no longer hear it. Raising his hands in front of his chest, he slowly opened his eyes. A white flickering was born in the palms of his hands, and this instantly became a ring and a spindle and wings, a small 3-D icon.

“Hey, Metatron. Thanks for coming out,” Haruyuki said to the icon who was the terminal for the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron.

Fuko’s eye lenses flashed.

“...Um...Metatron?” Haruyuki said again, moving the index finger of his right hand to poke her.

Metatron flapped the wings of her icon to brush his finger away. “It has been quite some time, Silver Crow,” she snapped.

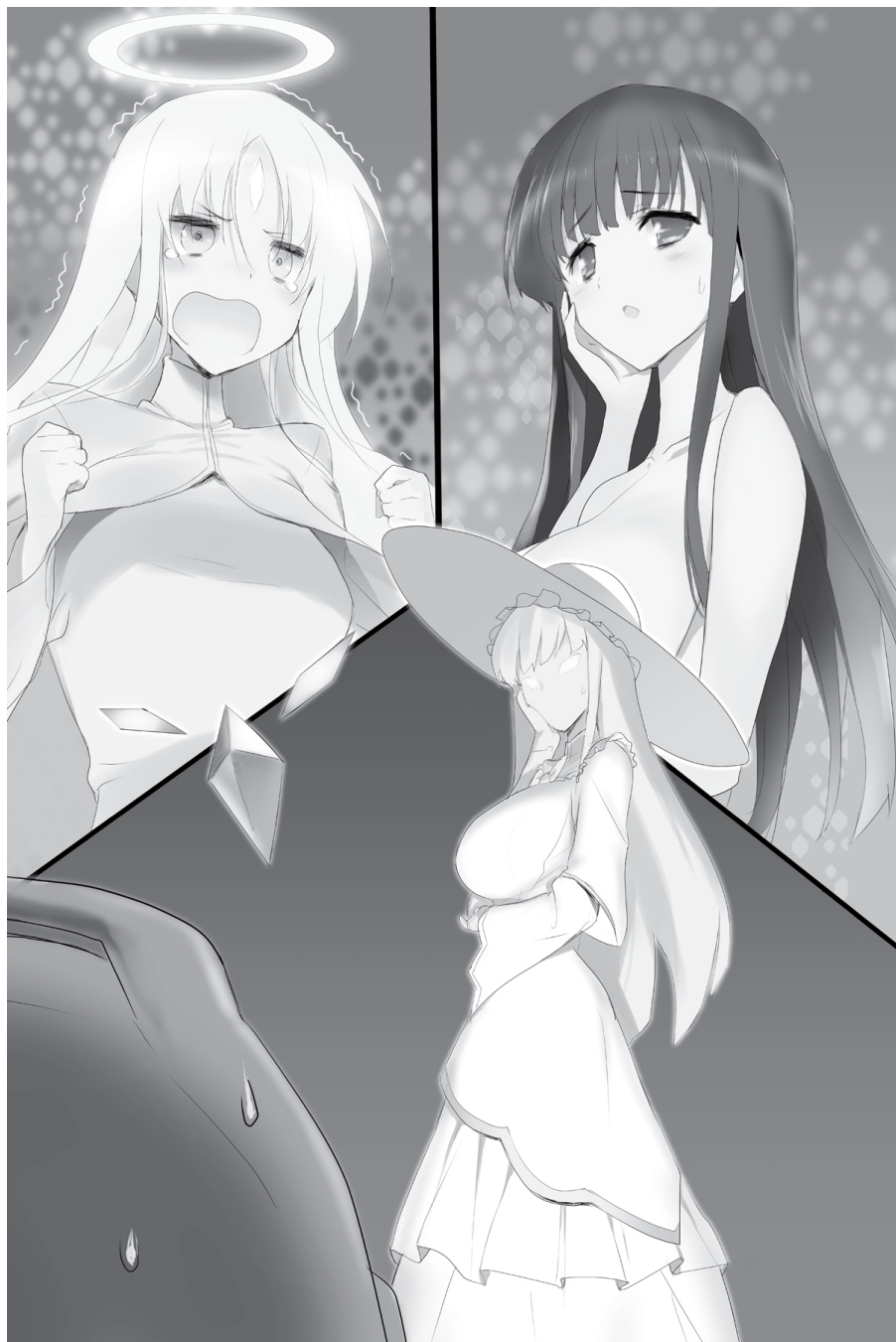
“Oh. S-sorry. I got busy with stuff...”

“There is no need to apologize. However, given that you have not shown your face in such a long time, why must I help you *now*?”

“I-I’m really sorry.” Haruyuki bowed his head deeply, trying to somehow put her in a better mood.

“Your pet is as annoying as always, hmm, Corvus?” Fuko asked, exasperated.

“Who are you calling a pet, you insolent creature?! Sky Raker, or whatever your name is, I demand that you prostrate yourself before me this instant!!”



See? Haruyuki couldn't keep himself from murmuring in his mind. *The wild card's on a rampage.*

It took three minutes to finally pacify Metatron. Since it took just a little over twenty minutes for them to travel there, they had an hour and a half until the automatic disconnect safety was activated. Considering the time they would need to secure a safe location within the Castle, they couldn't spend too much time preparing.

"So what exactly is it you would have me do, Silver Crow?" Metatron finally seemed willing to listen.

"So, um, I want to borrow your wings again," he hurried to explain.

"What? Is that all? Those wings are still on loan to you. You have no need to come to me every time and ask for permission to equip them."

"System-wise, that's true, but they aren't actually mine, after all. And there was one more thing I wanted your help with," he said.

The icon blinked the ring above her head in irritation. "How many times must I tell you before you understand? My body right now is in the middle of restoration. If you are to battle that Acceleration Research Society, then I would gladly join you, but unfortunately, I still do not have that power."

"N-no, that's not it. We're not taking them on today." As he brought the icon to face the north so Metatron could also see, he began to explain the details of the day's impromptu mission. "Um. We're going to charge into the Castle."

The icon's wings stopped dead. She descended into Haruyuki's palm before flapping her wings to rise up again. Whirling around, she flashed her ring with ferocious intensity.

"Say that *first*, you fool!"

"Aah! S-sorry."

"Area Zero Zero. You are well aware of how strongly I desire information about what you refer to as the Castle, are you not?! If you are going to enter it, there is no reason I would not join you. In fact, if you had not called me, I would have evaporated you ten times in succession once my powers returned!"

"Oh, ha. Ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha..." All Haruyuki could do was laugh awkwardly, while behind him, Fuko murmured in an exasperated voice, "You *really* are an irritating little person."

Sky Raker, equipped with Gale Thruster, and Haruyuki, equipped with Metatron Wings, faced each other in the center of the intersection at Azabudai Itchome. In the last Castle mission, Haruyuki had ridden on Fuko's back, but that was because her role had been as a catapult,

breaking away at the foot of the bridge. This time, they would both be going in, so they needed a more stable formation for their avatars.

Instinctively, Haruyuki knew this, but that didn't mean it wasn't going to be hard to keep his wits about him when he embraced Fuko from the front. His heart pounded, and he fixed his arms ahead of him at a strange angle.

Fuko giggled. She took a step toward him and wrapped her arms around him. "You never change, do you, Corvus?"

"I-I'm sorry. I haven't grown..."

"Some things are better unchanged."

"What are you dawdling about?" the 3-D icon on Haruyuki's right shoulder snapped in irritation. "If your preparations are complete, then fly immediately."

"R-right." Haruyuki slipped his own arms through the space between Fuko's back and Gale Thruster and pulled her close.

"We have to be more tightly fixed in place," Fuko noted, strengthening her embrace, so Haruyuki followed her example.

Although they were both duel avatars in hard armor, the pressure he felt had a softness to it somehow, making the gears of his thoughts slip, but he shook his head and got back on track. There was no room for error here. He had to focus his entire being on flying.

"I'm good on the bottom. Please make the corrections to our course, Corvus," Fuko instructed.

He took a deep breath. "Roger. I'll tell you when to fire Gale Thruster."

"Please do. My special-attack gauge and my thruster-energy gauge are both fully charged."

"Me too."

"I have been prepared for some time," Metatron said, a little quicker than usual.

"R-roger...You're not going to fall off while we're flying?"

"Your relative coordinates are fixed, so there is no issue. Now commence activity immediately." Metatron fluttered her wings as if to say she could wait no longer, and smiles spread across the faces of Haruyuki and Fuko. The tension building in his chest melted away, and his mind was calm.

"Okay, we're going to fly!" Haruyuki announced, deploying his own wings first to gently lift off. He started hovering at ten meters altitude and tilted his body parallel to the ground. Fuko, in his arms, would be flying on her back, but she looked at the upside-down field with an accustomed air.

Before their eyes, Sakurada Street stretched out straight ahead like a runway, gleaming white. Far in the distance, he could see the hazy spires of the stately Castle. In the deepest layer of that palace, the

Shrine of the Eight Divines, the final Arc lay sleeping, The Fluctuating Light—TFL.

In the Highest Level, Archangel Metatron had once told him:

“The reason for the existence of this space fusing three worlds—if I was to follow the example of you little warriors—the Accelerated World. It is to break into the Castle, a separate world in the center of this world, and the Shrine of the Eight Divines sunken in its depths and reach The Fluctuating Light sealed inside. I am confident of this.”

Metatron had declared that TFL itself was the meaning of the existence of the fighting game Brain Burst 2039. And Haruyuki believed her.

Kuroyukihime. I’m sorry for taking this risk in secret. But I will unlock the secret of TFL and return to you. To reach the end of the Accelerated World with you, Haruyuki called out in his heart.

Then he opened his eyes and stared at the end of the long, straight road.

“Suzaku will start to appear the instant we cross the boundary between the road and the bridge. We will reach and enter the south gate within three seconds from that point.” He reconfirmed the strategy, and Fuko nodded silently. Nodding back, he took a deep breath. “I’ll count down. Five, four, three, two, one...zero!!”

He activated the silver wings on his back with everything he had. The ten metal fins beat against the air, and the ferocious thrust they generated made the two avatars accelerate like a cannonball. The chalky buildings standing on either side of the road advanced frame by frame like a movie.

Weeeen! The wall of air increased in density. Their subjective speed reached two hundred kilometers per hour, and the instant he felt the acceleration from his flight ability dull, Haruyuki howled a brief “Aaaah!!”

He flapped his new wings as hard as he could—the Enhanced Armament Metatron Wings, sharply shaped like swords. White light jetted from them, and the intense thrust from dropping into second gear accelerated the pair abruptly.

“You’ve become quite masterful with these wings of mine.” This thought from Metatron, motionless on his shoulder, flashed into the back of his mind. He didn’t have the mental leeway to respond in words, but he sent out a feeling of gratitude as he continued to accelerate full throttle.

In inverse proportion to his rapidly decreasing special-attack gauge, his flight speed skyrocketed. The buildings on either side became a flowing line of gray and started to melt away. However, at four hundred kilometers per hour, their acceleration started to falter once again. Despite their combined weight, the doubling air resistance

was more difficult than he'd expected. The air became a highly viscous liquid pushing the pair back.

As he gritted his teeth, his wide-open eyes caught the shadow of a massive structure on the right side of the road—Toranomom Hills Tower. This was the midpoint of their runway. Holding onto Fuko tightly, he shouted half in his mind, "Master!!"

"Roger!!"

Gale Thruster sent pale-blue flames gushing from Sky Raker's back.

Their acceleration's third gear was also incredible. Haruyuki felt the armor of his entire body squeal at the intense Gs, while the high-frequency hum of Silver Crow's four wings was drowned out by the roar of the rocket boosters. Their subjective speed exceeded six hundred kilometers per hour, and his field of view gradually contracted.

As the world narrowed into a small circle, Haruyuki finally saw it: the bridge that appeared off Sakurada Avenue and the massive palace gate beyond it.

Theoretically, if they managed six hundred kilometers per hour, they would cross the five-hundred-meter-long bridge in three seconds and reach the gate before Suzaku finished appearing. But they were just barely going that fast. He wanted another level of acceleration.

I guess...I'll have to use it after all! Bracing himself, Haruyuki focused his imagination.

Light. The image of a light that pierces everything.

Silver Crow's entire body was enveloped in a faint glow. The Incarnate overlay also cloaked Fuko in his arms and Metatron on his shoulder.

G...ooooooooo!!

After this soundless battle cry, Haruyuki shouted, "Light Speeeeeeeed!!"

Top gear. Their final acceleration boost came from the lone second-level Incarnate technique Haruyuki had learned. The wall of compressed air generated a shock wave and shattered the buildings on either side.

Seven hundred...seven hundred and fifty...eight hundred kilometers per hour!

The end of the runway was approaching. Large buildings came into view once again ahead of them. On the left was the Metropolitan Police Department, on the right, the Ministry of Justice; beyond that, the earth disappeared, and there was only the bridge across the bottomless ravine and the Castle it connected with the field.

Almost on the bridge. Three seconds...two...

In the midst of a super-acceleration that made everything feel like

it was in slow motion, Haruyuki saw it: Bright-red flames flickered to life on the Suzaku altar in front of the Castle's south gate. In the blink of an eye, the flicker became a bonfire and transformed into a bird of flames with massive wings and a long tail. The appearance effect of the Super-class Enemy, one of the Four Gods, Suzaku.

But why?! We're not on the bridge yet!! An astonished scream echoed in Haruyuki's mind.

Suzaku's appearance was two seconds earlier than he'd expected. It would be impossible to cut past the altar and break through the gate before it finished manifesting. But he couldn't stop now. Even if they decelerated here, they'd only end up stopping in the middle of Suzaku's territory.

Break through, Corvus!!

You must go, Crow!!

Thoughts from Fuko and Metatron hit him at the same time.

"Unh...Aaaaaaaahh!!" Howling, Haruyuki mustered up every last bit of energy his mind and the system could offer and charged onto the bridge, accelerating even further.

When they reached the halfway point of the bridge, the God Suzaku finished materializing. The immortal bird, wrapped in crimson flames with a wingspan of thirty meters, opened its glittering ruby beak wide, flapped both wings powerfully, and floated up ahead of Haruyuki and Sky Raker.

An orange light grew inside the beak—the Breath attack.

They weren't going to make it. The instant those flames rained down on them, Haruyuki's and Fuko's health gauges would drop to zero, and they would fall into an inescapable state of Unlimited EK.

Suddenly, an intense light nearly blinded him. The source was his own shoulder. The 3-D icon settled there emitted a white light so bright it washed out even Suzaku's flames, while a thought filled the air, sonorous and solemn, befitting an Archangel.

"Stubborn beast, embodiment of destruction!! I shall not allow you to obstruct my flight nor that of my servant!!"

Her voice spread out through the field with an energy that was almost physical, and Suzaku stopped moving for the briefest of instances.

And then the Super-class Enemy roared like an explosion of flames, its voice too familiar to Haruyuki.

"The ruler of a mere hole in the ground would dare turn a hand against me, a God?! Foolish traitor, turn to ash with the little insects!!"

Because this exchange took place in thought rather than out loud, it did not even take a full second. But that almost-second was the most precious second of all the time Haruyuki had experienced in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Suzaku started the motion for its breath activation again. The remaining distance was one hundred meters.

A torrent of flames jetted out from the diamond-shaped opening of its beak. The very tip of the orange blaze shone an intense bluish-purple, indicative of the terrifyingly high temperature.

The hellish conflagration charged toward them from above, and the world was dyed the color of flames. Haruyuki flew at the limits of his superspeed while adjusting the angle of his wings to lower their altitude. If Fuko's back touched the bridge, they would definitely lose their balance, bounce up, and be swallowed by flames, but they couldn't evade the Breath unless they got as close as possible to the bridge.

Another centimeter. One more. And then...five millimeters.



Gale Thruster's stabilizer made a *chk!* sound as it scraped against the bridge's paving stone.

A single drop of Flame Breath bounced off Haruyuki's back, and that alone burned away 10 percent of his health gauge.

"Aaaaaah!!" With an unconscious howl, Haruyuki mustered the last of his imagination and kept flying away from the flames charging them from above. Cruising at an altitude of fifteen meters, Suzaku changed the angle of its breath to aim at Haruyuki and his comrades. But it wouldn't be able to hit them if they flew directly under it.

Stray sparks of fire ate into his armor and tore through his gauge. Gale Thruster made contact with the bridge two, three more times, sending sparks scattering.

Only fifty meters until the blind spot under Suzaku...forty...thirty. They should have been able to race through this distance in the blink of an eye at this speed, but it seemed hopelessly far.

No, it definitely wasn't hopeless. He had to believe with a single-minded focus and fly. In Fuko's Gale Thruster, Metatron's wings, and his own will.

Fly. Fly. Flyyyyyyy!!

Flash.

A blue light pierced Haruyuki's wide-open eyes. It was not the rage-filled bluish-purple of the Flame Breath, but an endlessly pure, deeper than any other, lapis lazuli blue.

The color of the sky. A color he had seen just once before.

The source of the light was the Castle's south gate blocking the road ahead. The thick stone doors had at some point opened just a little—wide enough for a single avatar.

A silhouette stood quietly in the darkness of that gap. The moonlight reflected off the armor, making it shine a royal blue that was even noble.

The silhouette had its right hand on its left hip. This image overlapped in his mind with the special attack motion of the twins Cobalt and Manganese in the fight the day before. The unsheathing of a sword...

The silhouette moved its right hand so quickly, it resembled a blue aura—an Incarnate overlay gushing from its entire body. This was clearly an attacking movement, but Haruyuki did not so much as hesitate in the direction or speed of their flight.

A clear voice reminiscent of a young samurai rang out sonorously.

"Heavenly Stratus!!"

The blade lashed out at incredible speed on the horizontal and then vertically drew out a cross-shaped sword of light.

At the same time, an enormous blue cross was carved into the

back of the God Suzaku, closing in before Haruyuki and his comrades.

The Super-class Enemy wavered slightly as it gushed pulsations of rage. The trajectory of the Breath pressing in on Haruyuki's back was knocked off, and the flames were swallowed up by the ravine to the side of the bridge.

Last chance!! Spending all his remaining energy, Haruyuki pushed for one last acceleration.

Finally, they charged into the space beneath Suzaku. The rage-filled aura pressed down on them from above and tried to crush them.

But this pressure was an illusion. They didn't begin to compare with the God Suzaku when it came to battle power, but they couldn't lose in determination.

Fighting the pressure, Haruyuki turned their course upward. A mere thirty meters until the gate. If they could fly through that opening, Suzaku couldn't come after them. He was laser focused.

But the Super-class Enemy did not miss this instant when he turned his mind from the powerful foe above to the gates in front of him.

"Up, Crow!!!" Metatron's voice echoed in his brain.

At the same time, a belt of flames whipped toward them from above. Suzaku's tail. If it hit them, they would crash into the bridge and be killed instantly.

"I won't...let yooou!!" Screaming, Haruyuki removed just his left hand from Fuko's back and held it up high.

He had already activated his second-level Incarnate technique Light Speed. And before this moment, he'd never even attempted to activate, much less succeed in activating, two Incarnate techniques simultaneously. But he had no choice now.

With the image of light still gathering in his wings, a silver overlay also rose up in his hand. Fingers stretched out like a sword, he thrust his hand directly at the tail of the immortal bird.

"Laser Sword!!"

A sword of light extended more than two meters from his hand and severed just one of Suzaku's flaming tail feathers.

Fuko also thrust her left hand out and shouted resolutely, *"Wind Veil!!"*

The green overlay that gushed from her left hand became a whirlwind that swallowed them up. The Incarnate barrier fought the flames that closed in and sent waterfalls of sparks scattering. But even Fuko could not completely defend against Suzaku's flames, and sparks broke through the barrier to singe their armor.

Sensing the health gauges in the upper left of his field of view dropping rapidly, Haruyuki made a last-minute correction to their trajectory. His aim was the slight gap the Laser Sword had made in

Suzaku's tail feathers. He inclined his body, folded his wings at an acute angle, and opened his eyes wide.

“Yaaaaaaah!!” With a final battle cry, he charged through the eye of the needle.

The instant they intersected with the tail feathers, his field of view was dyed a bright red. His health gauge dropped even further, falling to 50 percent.

In the next instant, Haruyuki and his comrades emerged beneath the night sky, a plume of sparks trailing behind them like a comet tail. He listened to Suzaku howl with rage behind them as they flew the final thirty meters and plunged through the crack in the doors.

Haruyuki didn't remember how he'd landed. When he came to with a gasp, he was being held by Fuko on the snow-white ground.

"...Master...Where are we?" he muttered, staring vacantly into Sky Raker's eye lenses.

It wasn't Fuko who answered his question, however, but rather the 3-D icon floating above his head.

"What are you talking about, servant?! This place, this very space is Area Zero Zero! We *are* still in the external area, but we have indeed penetrated that isolated space at long last!!"

Hearing her lively voice, his own head cleared, and he finally pulled himself upright.

"Are you all right, Corvus?" Fuko asked.

"O-of course." He bobbed his head. "Um. How long was I unconscious?"

"Just a few seconds. Your deceleration and landing were also wonderful."

"Th-they were? ...That was probably automatic control." Scratching his head, he took a fresh look at their surroundings.

Above his head, the inky night sky embraced the massive full moon. Beneath him was the ground, a combination of complicated tiles. It seemed the Moonlight stage continued.

When he lowered his gaze, he found stone slabs standing upright about twenty meters ahead. Made of pure-white marble, they were the massive gate doors. They were now closed with no gap between them, and a silver metal plate was attached with a bolt in the center. A relief of the God Suzaku carved into it, the object shone coolly bathed in the moonlight, the gate seal he'd seen before.

It had probably regenerated when Haruyuki and his comrades charged in, and the doors closed. But the one who opened it before they barged in had to have been *him*...

Now Haruyuki was finally fully awake, and he whirled around, still sitting on the ground. And he saw it.

An azure duel avatar standing a little ways off inconspicuously but still cloaked in an overwhelming sense of presence. The somehow

noble armor design, the straight sword on the left hip. The sky-blue eye lenses quietly shining as they stared at Haruyuki.

He took a deep breath and held it for a minute before quietly calling out,

“...Lead...”

Instantly, a faint smile bled across the face mask. A drop of warm light rose up in the almond-shaped eye lenses, spilled out soundlessly, floated in space, and disappeared.

The young azure samurai avatar, Trilead Tetroxide, sat formally on his knees to match Haruyuki, who was still sitting on the ground. “It has been some time, Crow,” he said with his airy, beautiful voice. “You really came back, hmm?”

“Sorry I’m late.” He managed to squeeze the words out from the depths of his chest where he felt something warm welling up ceaselessly. “But I came...because I promised you...that I’d see you again.”

“Yes.” Trilead nodded his head deeply. “I believed you... That this time would most certainly come.”

He stood up with a movement that belied gravity and approached them, almost sliding, and deliberately extended his right hand. Haruyuki took that hand and got to his feet and then shook hands with Trilead again, reflecting on the flood of emotions that came back to him.

This was the reunion he’d wanted so badly, and it wasn’t that he wasn’t happy. But Haruyuki did feel a sad pain pass through his heart. If only Wolfram Cerberus, whom he had similarly hoped to be reunited with, could have been there. Haruyuki was sure he could have become best friends with Trilead.

Haruyuki swallowed this fleeting pain and gripped Lead’s hand tightly once more. Then he let go, took a step back, and looked around.

The plaza inside the Castle’s south gate. The first time he’d visited, it had been a Heian stage, and when he escaped, it had been a Purgatory stage, so it looked totally different again in the Moonlight stage, but the terrain was basically the same. A wide passageway stretched out to the north from the square plaza and led to the imposingly beautiful main building of the Castle. On either side of the passage, gothic-style circular pillars stood at regular intervals, and orange watch fires lit up the niches between the pillars.

But the atmosphere was decisively different from the last time. What exactly was it...?

As he furrowed his eyebrows, Metatron spoke up from his right shoulder. “In the memories of Silver Crow that I referenced, several hostile, high-level Beings were positioned at this point. Did you

dispatch them, Lead or whatever you're called?"

Right. That was it—when they'd broken in and when they'd escaped, Haruyuki and Maiden had had to work hard to stay hidden from the soldier Enemies/Beings that patrolled this place. But now, there was not a single Enemy, at least not that he could see.

Trilead was naturally surprised to hear his name from a ten-centimeter icon, but after blinking a few times, he answered politely, "No, it wasn't me. I alone could never defeat the Enemies who guard this plaza."

"You alone...But in the Castle..." Haruyuki started to say, baffled.

And then Fuko beside him quickly lifted her face. Tracing her gaze, Haruyuki also looked up at the night sky.

There was someone at the top of a remarkably tall pillar that stood on the boundary of the plaza and the passageway. The armor was a black that melted into the night sky. But the pale moonlight caught and highlighted the outline of the sharp design.

"I have a very bad feeling," Fuko murmured.

This someone casually leapt down from the pillar, likely twenty meters tall, and somersaulted in midair before making a perfect landing.

Haruyuki knew the inky avatar walking briskly toward them. There was no mistaking the figure he had fought only four days earlier in Shibuya. But there was no way *he* could be here. There was a reason why he *couldn't* be here.

"How...?" Haruyuki groaned hoarsely, while Fuko beside him took a step and then another forward.

The black avatar stopped a mere two meters away from Fuko and made his greetings, voice and attitude both laid-back. "Hey Rekka, Crow. Long time no see. Or wait, I guess not. Four days no see. Maybe it's my first time meeting the person on your shoulder, Crow? No...I kinda feel like we fought a real long time ago." The avatar waved a lazy hand, the hilts of swords crossed on his back poking out from above his shoulders.

The first seat of Great Wall's Six Armors. The Anomaly, Graphite Edge. There was no mistake. But how could he be inside the Castle in the Unlimited Neutral Field? Wasn't he supposed to have been caught in an Unlimited EK on the God Genbu's altar outside the Castle's north gate?

Haruyuki stood stock-still, dumbfounded, and Trilead came up beside Graph to give him one further shock.

The young samurai avatar looked at Haruyuki and Fuko in turn as he uttered entirely unexpected words. "You all seem to be acquainted, but just in case, allow me to introduce you. This is Graphite Edge, my honored teacher. He guided me in sword usage and the ways of the

world as a Burst Linker. He is also the parent who gave me the Brain Burst program itself.”

To be continued.



▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD**

THE BLACK DUAL SWORDSMAN



PROMINENCE TRAJECTORY

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She painted the clear glaze on the strawberries spread out on top of the cream. The strawberry jam mixed into the glaze gave it a light-pink hue. She wasn't particularly good with red liquids, other than food or drink, whether they were aromatic oils or detergents, but she wasn't bothered by this faint saturation. She moved her hand quickly yet neatly to make the many strawberries shine with a brilliant luster.

Once she finished that task, she spun the marble turntable around and checked how it looked. The No. 6 size cake—eighteen centimeters across, in other words—was covered in pure-white cream with rings of strawberries arranged on top. The cream beneath them was laid out in a narrow lattice, which was where the name of the cake came from: *le labyrinthe de la fraise*, or the strawberry labyrinth. The selling point of this one was that when a piece was cut, there would be three strawberries on it.

Having finished her personal check, Mihaya Kakei lifted her face and spoke to the woman in her forties mixing cheesecake batter to her right. "Could you take a look?"

The woman—Mihaya's aunt Kaoru Himi—set her bowl on the workstation and came over. She spun the cake around and smiled. "This is great, Myah. I'll leave the rest of the labyrinths to you."

"...N—" In her great relief, she very nearly said "NP" but quickly corrected herself. "Thank you."

Once her aunt nodded and returned to her station, Mihaya let her mouth relax just a little. She didn't normally smile that often, but she couldn't help it just now. This was the first time she'd been told a cake she'd finished could go out into the store as is.

She moved the strawberry cake into the fridge and set a sponge cake on the turning table. She painted it with a palette knife, a bowl of fresh cream tucked under one arm.

Her movements were bold and delicate, but the important thing was the rhythm. In making a cake, in operating an electric motorcycle—and in fights in *that* world.

Her mind threatened to wander off, and she pulled it back to the cake in front of her. Today was Saturday, the day *she* visited the shop.

The order was always the strawberry labyrinth. So the cake Mihaya was making now would go into her mouth. Any imperfections in the presentation might have an effect on the Territories in the evening. Of course, being one of the Kings of Pure Color, she wouldn't stand directly on the battlefield, but she had the important job of putting together the teams and proposing the strategies to defend Nerima and neighboring Nakano.

And now she was here thinking about that again. Her aunt, the chief pâtissier, was very strict when she was wearing her chef coat, and if Mihaya did her work absentmindedly, she would send rebukes flying her way immediately. It had been over two years already since she started in the kitchen as an apprentice, but she still got yelled at a lot more than she got complimented.

But that was NP. That was the kind of person her aunt was, so Mihaya could relax and leave the kitchen in her hands. She'd never once felt anxious about the business she'd inherited from her father since she'd remodeled it into a Western sweets shop.

Yes. Mihaya, in tenth grade this year, was an apprentice baker cum waitress at Patisserie La Plage, and also the owner/operator.

Her father had run a café in Nerima's Sakuradai neighborhood but passed away suddenly four years ago from an incurable heart condition called idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy. It was the fall of Mihaya's twelfth year.

Although it was indelicate, Mihaya was surprised at the number of relatives who appeared at the funeral. Her father had been a playboy who loved coffee and motorcycles and had been treated like the black sheep of the Kakei family, many of whom worked in conservative industries, so they'd had almost no contact with his family.

She somehow made it through her duties as chief mourner and fell into a daze, but she wasn't given the time to chew on her sadness at home alone. At the first meal after the funeral, her aunts and uncles immediately began to discuss her future.

Her father, on his sickbed, had created a formal will after talking with a reluctant Mihaya any number of times about what would happen after he died. Because her mother had passed away a long time ago, Mihaya would inherit the land and store in her father's name and his considerable amount of savings. Additionally, the national conservatorship law applied, and Mihaya would enter a full boarding school in Nerima until she graduated from junior high. That was all in the will.

When Mihaya told them this, the aunts and uncles cried "Unthinkable!" as one and insisted that a child needed a family, that one of them would take her in. Mihaya said she didn't want to leave

the house, and they tried to tear her down with logic.

Inheriting property cost an incredible amount in taxes, so they told her she should take this opportunity to dispose of the house, the land, and one bright-red Italian electric motorcycle. They would carefully manage the money for her until little Mihaya came of age.

Now that some years had passed, she believed that they had spoken with good intentions. No matter the household, the burden of taking in a child who was about to start junior high was large. So Mihaya was actually surprised at the number of relatives who said she should come live with them. She had been surprised and grateful but had no intention of becoming the child of the people who hadn't understood her father and his way of life.

Mihaya held off on answering them right then and there. She told them she was too sad about the death of her father, and the day had been long and exhausting; she needed a little time to think. The aunts and uncles agreed to this reluctantly, exchanging looks with one another, and went back to the hotel in Ikebukuro after telling her they would come again the following evening.

The next morning, Mihaya started to move. She went to see her aunt, the only one of her father's four siblings who simply disappeared when the funeral was over, Kaoru Himi.

When she went to visit her aunt, the pâtissier at a cake shop at a major Akasaka hotel, she did not ask her to take her in, as her father had told her to. Instead, she headhunted her. She said she was going to renovate the café her father had left her to open a Western-style cake shop, and she wanted her aunt to be the chief pâtissier.

She didn't think her aunt would simply say yes when she had a position with responsibilities at a famous kitchen. Mihaya had resolved to give up on the idea if she asked three times and got a no three times, but her aunt asked her only one question.

"Are you making the café a Western cake shop to bring me in?"

"No, that's not it." Mihaya rejected this immediately. "It was my parents' dream to open a cake shop there. Until my mother got sick and passed away when I was a baby."

Her aunt had thought about it for a full minute before finally replying briefly, "All right."

Not long after, Mihaya had asked her aunt why she had so readily accepted this large request, one that would change the course of her aunt's life, who was still in her thirties. Kaoru had given her an answer with a smile:

Mihaya's father, her aunt's younger brother, had told her nothing except "If something happens, take care of Mihaya." And back when Mihaya's mother was newly married to her father, she and Kaoru had exchanged a promise to help each other out when they opened their

own cake shops. This was long before Mihaya was born, when her aunt and her mother were studying at the same cooking school. That was when Mihaya first learned that Kaoru was the one who had introduced her mother to her father.

The other aunts and uncles definitely did not seem pleased by this choice, but it was no longer at the stage where they could voice any objection. That evening, they all went home to Osaka or Sendai, and in their place, Aunt Kaoru and her daughter, Mihaya's cousin two years her junior, came to visit the house/shop in Sakuradai. She had absolutely no idea that this cousin would change her life as definitively as her aunt.

Her aunt opened the door toward creating the cake shop that had been her parents' dream. Her cousin gave her a world to sublimate the sadness she'd been pushing down for so long.

Her name was Akira Himi. She'd been in fourth grade at the time, but with her very short hair, hoodie, and twill pants, together with the simple shape of her glasses, she had a slightly androgynous air.

Only the adults had been part of the procession at her father's funeral, so it had actually been two years since she'd seen Akira. For elementary school students, two years was an incredibly long time, and Mihaya and Akira were both far from chatty, so Mihaya felt a little awkward when they ended up alone at some point.

But Akira was almost mysteriously calm, and after staring at Mihaya for a moment with her quiet eyes somehow reminiscent of the bottom of the sea, she offered her a certain something. Not a physical object, but a program. The key to releasing her soul and accelerating.

In the strange world she visited in the garage behind her house sitting alongside Akira on the seat of the large motorcycle, Mihaya finally cried. She cried and cried and used up a lifetime's worth of tears.

In the four years since then, Mihaya had not shed a single tear. Not in the real world, not in the Accelerated World.

She didn't have the time to cry. The hours flowed past with a ferocious speed. Even when her mind was accelerated a thousand times, that flow did not stop. She had to keep running straight ahead at the limit of the speed she could produce. Like a leopard racing lithely through a grassy field.

Naturally, she had school on weekdays, so she could only help with the evening preparation, but on Saturday mornings, she was full-on in the kitchen, and in the afternoons, she changed into her waitress uniform and worked the counter.

Mihaya wanted to focus on making cakes, but her aunt thought she should also get experience in customer service if she was going to become a pâtissier. It was pretty difficult for her to smile in a friendly way, but once she tried it, she also enjoyed working in the front. Especially when she saw the children with their eyes shining before the many-colored cakes lined up in the showcase, and her heart was filled with a mysterious warmth.

The problem was that the uniform her aunt proposed was the modern maid look, but she'd been forced to accept it when Kaoru told her it was the design her late mother had sketched during their student days. It was surprisingly very popular with the other two counter girls, and after wearing it for three years, she'd gotten used to it.

The strawberry labyrinth Mihaya had decorated in the morning—her aunt had baked the cake—was essentially sold out by three in the afternoon; there were only two slices left. A little on edge, she kept glancing at the clock on her virtual desktop when, right before her shift was ending at three thirty, she heard a synthetic chime modeled after a doorbell.

Slipping into the shop before the door was fully open was a small girl in a white blouse and a navy pleated skirt. The uniform of the elementary division of the boarding school Mihaya had also attended.

“Welcome.” Her internal relief and anticipation couldn't have been audible in Mihaya's voice, but the girl met her eyes and smiled mischievously. The red hair tied up on either side of her head swinging, she approached the showcase on quick feet and peered in, almost pressing her freckled nose against the glass.

Listening with a smile to the sound of the tablet and other educational materials shifting inside the red backpack, Mihaya waited for her order. That said, she already knew what the girl would have.

“Yesss!” The instant she spotted the two remaining slices of strawberry cake, her face lit up. “There’s some left! Can I have a labyrinth?!”

“One piece of strawberry labyrinth, yes? Please wait just a moment,” she responded politely—she definitely couldn’t just say “gotcha” when she was in uniform—but omitted the eat-in or take-out question. She readied a plate rather than a box and opened the refrigerated case.

As she carefully moved a piece of the labyrinth to a plate with a cake server, she heard the chime of the automatic door once again. Then the sound of multiple feet approaching forcefully together with energetic shouts.

“I’m doing the strawberry larynx!”

“I want strawberry, too! Loads of strawberries!”

The new customers were young girls, about five or six years old. A woman who was likely their mother entered the store behind them. After Mihaya called out “Welcome,” she left the rest of the customer service to the other waitress and started to move toward the register. But there, she anticipated another problem.

The two girls, apparently sisters, had simultaneously realized that the “strawberry” in the case was the last slice. They looked at each other and fell silent as if measuring the timing before crying out in unison.

“I want strawberry!”

“No! I said it first!”

“Noooo! Strawberryyyyyy!”

Tears immediately sprang up in the eyes of the younger sister, and the mother came up behind them with a furrowed brow, likely about to say something along the lines of “You’re the older one. You need to be nice to your sister.”

And then the girl with the red backpack who had ordered the labyrinth first smiled lightly as she said to Mihaya, “Sorry, order change. One cherry tart.” She gently patted the head of the child in tears squatting next to her. “C’mon, look. There’s two strawberries now.”

Mihaya quietly moved back to the case and returned the labyrinth plate. Once the case was closed, the younger sister’s eyes grew wide.

“There’s two! Mommy, there’s two strawberries!”

The redheaded girl stood up with a smile and gave a light bow to the mother, who was dipping her head apologetically.

Mihaya took the cherry tart off another shelf and set it on a plate before moving to the register once more, feeling a sad sort of pain.

The girl who had ordered the strawberry cake first was in sixth grade. Compared with the kindergarten-aged sisters, she was much

older, but she was still of an age where the world in general regarded her as a child. No one would have reproached her for not giving up the cake she'd been looking forward to for a whole week.

But she wouldn't—or couldn't—ignore the tears of a child in that situation. Any such childishness had long ago disappeared. The subjective time the eleven-year-old girl had experienced was most likely far greater than that of sixteen-year-old Mihaya.

When she walked over to the register terminal on the right edge of the counter, an accounting window popped up in her vision.

The redheaded customer also glanced at the display stating that one tart was 430 yen, and then, after a moment's thought, said, "Please add an iced milk tea."

"Very good." Nodding, she added a drink set from the menu window. With the total now six hundred yen, the girl touched the confirmation button, and *ka-ching!* They heard a sound patterned after an old cash register.

The register terminal on the counter could also accept cash—that is, physical money—but this feature was used perhaps once a month. In this era, for the majority of people, money had become nothing more than a number their Neurolinker displayed in their field of view. If you linked your e-money account with your bank account, it would even automatically recharge your balance.

But Mihaya knew that the six hundred yen the redheaded girl paid for the tart and iced tea was money saved up from the meager allowance the school gave her. And that this Saturday afternoon teatime was basically the sole luxury she permitted herself.

When the accounting window disappeared, Mihaya pushed back the ripples in her heart and said, "It will be just a moment, so please take a seat."

"Okay." The redhead grinned and walked over to the eat-in area set up in a corner of the shop.

Mihaya watched her small back for a second and then began to prepare the tea in the mini-kitchen on the opposite side of the register counter. In exchange for not being able to eat the labyrinth, she wanted her to at least enjoy a delicious cup of tea.

When the clock had gone a little past three thirty, the waitress for the late shift took over, and Mihaya was done.

Walking toward the door at the back of the shop with the sign that read **STAFF ONLY**, she glanced at the eat-in corner. The redheaded girl was racing her fingers across her virtual desktop at a table by the window, having long since finished the tart, but perhaps sensing Mihaya's gaze, she lifted her face. Seeing Mihaya, she nodded lightly and picked her backpack up from the seat next to her.

The waitresses at the counter didn't so much as blink when the

girl went through the door out into the back room with Mihaya. They'd been told the girl was from Mihaya's old school (this was actually true), and Mihaya helped her study every Saturday evening.

In the back, there was the office and a washroom, as well as a changing room for the staff, but Mihaya passed by these and walked right to the back. With only twenty-five minutes before four o'clock, she didn't have the luxury of taking her time to change clothes. She unlocked the door in the far back and let the girl go in ahead of her.

There was nothing but a low table and a sofa in the center of the nine-square-meter room. Back in the café days, this room had been used as a private party space, but Mihaya used the excuse that a cake shop had no need for that, so it had become dead space that she currently used for her own purposes.

The instant the door was locked again, the redheaded girl cast aside the air of an honors student she'd projected up to that point and threw herself onto the sofa headfirst. Kicking and flailing her legs and feet in white socks, she groaned strangely, "Unnnnnh."

Mihaya's mouth started to spread into a smile, and she pulled it back in before speaking. "If you're that upset about it, you should've just eaten it."

"I'm not upset!" A childish shriek came back at her immediately. "Just changin' my unfinished strawberry business into kinetic energy!"

Eventually, she stretched out her legs with force and flopped onto her back, locking her hands behind her head. "And anyway, if I was upset, that'd be, like, you know...not nice to Chef Kaoru, since she made the cherry tart. That tart was super-tasty, too, after all."

"...It was."

The girl seemed to have intuited it from Mihaya's reaction alone. She lifted her head slightly and stared with large eyes that looked green in the light. "Did you maybe make the labyrinth today, Pard?"

Asked so directly, she couldn't wiggle away. Careful not to change the expression on her face, she replied briefly, "Just the deco. Chef made the cake."

"...You did...Sorry for giving it away." The girl sat up and started to bow her head.

"You don't have to apologize," Mihaya offered quickly. "In fact, I have to thank you. If you hadn't given the cake up, Rain, I'm sure those kids would've cried."

"Crying makes kids stronger. Or that's what Chef Kaoru would say, I guess."

This time, Mihaya did smile a little at the reply and announced crisply, "From now on, I'll be finishing all the labyrinths on Saturdays."

"Oh! Then I'm excited for next week." Grinning, the girl shook her

red pigtails once before recomposing herself. “Kay then. Better get this Territories strategy meeting started. I guess Helix’s attacking today, so we let out guard down, and they’ll eat us up.”

“K.” Mihaya answered briefly and took a deep breath to switch mental gears. From a cake shop waitress to the Submaster of the Legion Prominence, Blood Leopard.

She sat on the sofa and pulled XSB cables out from the home router installed in the back of the table. Because this strategy room was shielded against electromagnetic waves, they couldn’t connect to the global net without a wired connection.

She inserted the plug into her Neurolinker, and the girl did the same thing on the other side of the table. And then the leader of Prominence, the Red King, Scarlet Rain, the one and only Yuniko Kozuki, raised two fingers of her right hand. Not a peace sign, but a signal for the start of the countdown.

“Two, one.”

In time with the brief words, Mihaya chanted the magic command she had been taught four years earlier.

“Burst Link.”

The full-dive-type fighting-network game, Brain Burst 2039. This was the new world her cousin Akira had given Mihaya.

It wasn't as though she'd liked full dive games when she was a kid. She'd basically only played motorcycle racing games with her father sometimes. So when Akira had first explained the concept of the BB program, it didn't actually click for her. She even wondered why anyone would get so worked up about a violent fighting game that they'd accelerate their thoughts.

But that diffidence vanished the instant she first set foot in the Accelerated World. Her duel opponent was, of course, her parent Akira—her name as a Burst Linker was Aqua Current—and the stage attribute was Primeval Forest. Even though the terrain remained the familiar Sakurada in Nerima where she lived, the concrete and asphalt were completely gone, and in their place were massive knotty trees and strangely shaped rocks, green grasses, and a perfectly blue sky that continued as far as she could see.

The overwhelming detail of everything there, every blade of grass, every stone, was completely different from the VR games Mihaya had known up to that point. The gentle breeze held the scent of forests, and the sunlight caught particles in the air and made them glint and glitter. The vast amount of information vividly stimulating all five of her senses could even have been said to be greater than that of the real world.

It wasn't just the external world that had been entirely transformed. Mihaya herself had changed into something not human, just like Akira. Her whole body was wrapped in crimson semitransparent armor that felt like neither plastic nor glass, long retractable claws grew from her hands and feet, and she had the head of a leopard with sharp fangs.

After checking her own image out, Mihaya felt a powerful urge ahead of any confusion. She wanted release—she wanted to set free all the things she'd been pushing back in her heart all this time, ever since she learned the name of her father's illness.

Mihaya ran. She kicked at the ground of the Primeval Forest stage

with all the might her leopard's paws possessed and flew. From one area boundary to the other, she ran at a speed that surpassed even the wind. And as she ran, she wept. She cried for her big, reliable, gentle father.

Her tears finally dried up when there were ten minutes left in the thirty-minute duel. Returning to her starting point, Mihaya silently faced Akira, who had been waiting patiently.

Her cousin also had a form that resembled her real-world self. Akira's avatar, surprisingly slender limbs wrapped in a membrane of water that continuously flowed from top to bottom, was more singular than Mihaya's leopard-person avatar while still being reminiscent somehow of the girl in the real world.

Mihaya stared at Akira's pale eyes, flickering beyond the streaming water, and asked just one question.

Will I be able to run even faster?

The answer was very simple.

If you get stronger.

Gazing down on the Primeval Forest stage below her, the same as that day four years earlier, Mihaya waited for the battle to start.

The stage itself was the same, but this was not a normal duel. It was the Territories that were held every Saturday evening, so the focus was less on individual battle abilities than on the coordination of the team. She couldn't go into a full-speed dash with enough force to push through the blazing characters FIGHT like she normally did. Still, Mihaya's strategy in the Territories was simple: immediately identify an enemy's critical point and bite into it as hard as she could.

Transformed into a crimson leopard-person, Mihaya was camped out at the top of the highest tree on the western side of the stage. Visibility was poor because of the massive trees and the branches and leaves extending out in a broad circle, along with the fog that occasionally formed, but the sharp eyes of a leopard didn't miss the faintest of reflections of light below the trees. And there were basically no large objects to hide behind in the belt of grasslands cutting diagonally across the center of the stage—Kanpachi Street in the real world.

As she sent her eyes racing intently across the world below from the treetop 250 meters in the air, she heard an impatient voice from a branch just below.

“Paaaard, let's just go and make the hit ourseeeelves,” said an F-type avatar with a slender form. Her name was Mustard Salticid.

Her color name, Mustard, was easily remembered thanks to the prompt provided by the mustard-colored armor covering her body, but nearly every Burst Linker who met her had to ask about her proper

name two or three times, and then ask again the next time they met her. It was also an English word Mihaya hadn't known, but apparently *salticid* meant jumping spider. And true to her name, Salticid had eight round eyes on her head, lined up in a row. Naturally, the surface area of her face mask couldn't contain them, so the eyes on the end reached the back of her head.

Thus, her field of view was unusually wide—although, apparently, the sensation of being able to see behind you even while facing forward took some getting used to—and her ability to detect enemies was in the top three even in the Legion. Her powers of concentration, however, needed a little more work, and she was already bored of searching, even though it hadn't been five minutes yet since the start of the Territories.

“Not yet. After we find the other enemy squad.” Mihaya continued to scan the forest in the distance.

The Territories were a team battle with a minimum of three on three. The Red Legion, Prominence, currently had thirty-three members, so they would split up into teams of eight to simultaneously defend the four areas of Nerima. However, this was the ideal. Given that Burst Linkers were, in principle, K-12 students, they weren't necessarily always free on Saturday evening. The policy of Prominence Legion Master Scarlet Rain was that if members had something to take care of in the real, they could prioritize that, so the number of people taking part each week averaged thirty. And that day—June 29, 2047—three people had canceled unexpectedly, so there had been only twenty-five people at the pre-battle meeting. Split into four teams, they were six, six, six, and seven.

Of course, they'd anticipated areas where the fighting would be fiercest, and it wouldn't have been impossible to throw ten or more people in there, but no prediction was absolute. The leader of Helix, the midsize Legion from Itabashi that had been coming to attack Nerima every week this last month, had a pretty good head on his shoulders, so it was difficult to gamble on an attack area.

Thus, an even number of defending personnel were assigned to Nerima Areas Nos. 1-4, with the leader for Area No. 1 being the Red King herself; while Area No. 2 would be guided by Blood Leopard, the head of the executive group Triplex; and Areas Nos. 3 and 4, the other two members of the Triplex, Cassis Mousse and Thistle Porcupine, would spread out their defensive power in all directions. And Mihaya's team had gotten Helix.

Since the number of people on the attacking side matched that on the defending side, they were six enemies and six allies. Given their numbers, they would split up into two groups or, at worst, three. Mihaya had the four with the greatest battle power go on ahead to

occupy the central base, while she and Mustard tried to suss out the enemy's movements with their sharp eyes.

Helix had also apparently split into two groups, and she had already spotted the four that were likely the main force. Just like their own main force, they were heading straight for the central base—also known as the stronghold—so they likely weren't even trying to hide. The problem was the other two members. If she didn't sniff them out, their own main force could get caught in a pincer attack and be wiped out.

She heard a lazy voice from below once again. "Buuut if *we* crush the enemy main force with a pincer attack *first*, then all we have to do is hide in the stronghold, and we win, riight?"

"It's not *hide*. It's *dig in*," she retorted, but Salticid did make a certain amount of sense. A great number of the Burst Linkers who belonged to Prominence did indeed have superior red-type—i.e., long-distance—fighting abilities, just as one would expect from the Red Legion, so having everyone charge their special-attack gauges and dig into the stronghold to turn it into a contest of firepower was one strategy for victory.

But naturally, there were risks. The stronghold itself had no defensive powers, so when they used the digging-in strategy, she wanted to have at least two shield avatars with defensive abilities. The breakdown of the four in the main force Mihaya had sent ahead had a good balance with two red, one blue, and one green, but she was somewhat uneasy about them defending the base from all directions.

And the Helix Legion Master was on the enemy team. Thanks to his sharp strategizing, Helix stood out from the rest of the midsize Legions, and there was no way he hadn't readied some countermeasures to the firepower encampment technique that was Promi's best party trick.

And then the enemy's main force stopped their run through the forest on the east side.

The tall tree where Mihaya and Salticid sat was the large chimney of a cleaning factory in Higirigaoka, Nerima, in the real world. As the crow flies, it was over two kilometers to the intersection of Kanpachi Street and Expressway 441, where the central stronghold was located.

At this distance, even her leopard eyes could just barely make out the number of enemies. As Mihaya continued to seek out the other enemy group, she sent a question down to the branch below. "Cid, can you identify the four enemies beyond the base?"

"Mm, hang on," Salticid replied, stretching her neck out almost as if she were trying to get even a little closer. A few seconds later, the answer came back to Mihaya, with a briskness that was utterly different from her demeanor up to that point. "Big green one in the

lead. Pretty sure it's Verdant Colossus. Big brown one in the back; that's Cinnamon Raccoon. And the purple midsize is Azalea Baton... maybe. And then a small yellow in the rear. Never seen 'em before, but it's probably Rutile Check."

".....!"

Mihaya inhaled sharply, and Salticid came to the same realization.

"Whoa, whoa! So then, that means the leader Berry's not there! So those four aren't the main force?!"

Of course, it wasn't a rule or anything that the team leader always led the main squad. Mihaya herself, the leader of the Promi team, had stayed behind to search for the enemy, after all.

But of the six people on the Helix team, the Legion Master Beryllium Coil had conspicuously more direct attack power. If he thought he could overtake the central base with a squad without him on it and essentially composed of defensive colors on top of that, he was gravely underestimating Prominence, one of the six great Legions.

No, I can't believe that someone as sharp as Beryllium would put together such a slapdash strategy. In which case, were he and the other avatar—by the process of elimination, the red-type Chili Powder—planning to ambush the Prominence party from behind and wipe them out?

But even if they were, those two avatars still had to cross the grasslands of Kanpachi Street. The Promi party was currently moving forward and would reach the central base within the next two minutes. There was not enough time for Coil to come around from the rear, and if they approached from either side of the wide road, they would be totally exposed to the Promi team, ensuring that their health gauges were eaten away by long-distance attacks before they could make contact. There would have been no point in splitting into teams.

"Did we miss their crossing?" Mihaya murmured.

"No waaay!" Salticid rejected the idea immediately. "Nobody could sneak across Kanpachi right under our eyes!"

Mihaya nodded; it was true. It was possible to break across the grassy belt using a hiding technique of some kind, but neither the leader nor Chili Powder, accompanying him, had any such technique. Or so she thought.

The reason she couldn't say for sure was because duel avatars grew. They obtained abilities, special attacks, and Enhanced Armament through their level-up bonuses. Although she could only run four years earlier, Mihaya, too, had gained a number of powers now that she was at level six.

However, there were limits, too. As a general rule, it was not possible to obtain abilities that diverged significantly from the avatar's color affiliation. Beryllium was a close-range metal color, and Chili

was long-distance. Neither was the type to awaken a hiding ability so powerful it could deceive the visual acuity of both Mihaya and Salticid.

Considering this, Mihaya called up in the back of her mind an image of Beryllium, an avatar she'd fought directly any number of times. His armor was a bluish silver-gray, and just as the "coil" of his name suggested, he had powerful coil springs equipped in his arms. The large jackknife that stretched out in an instant with the power of these springs was his greatest weapon.

Given that he was a metal color, his fists were also tough, and Mihaya had a hard time handling his fighting style, a constant switching between a striking-type knuckle attack and a slashing-type knife attack. The instant she thought it was a punch and tried to dodge, the knife would come at her, and the way he doubled the distance between them was truly annoying. On top of that, although he used to have a knife only in his right arm, he now had one in his left as well, likely due to a level-up bonus.

Her thoughts froze there, and Mihaya checked again the mini-health gauges of the six members of the enemy team lined up in her field of view. On top, the leader Beryllium Coil, level five. But the last time they'd fought, he'd been level four.

"Cid, *fly!*" Mihaya shouted the instant the various bits of information came together in her brain and guided her to a single inspiration.

Despite her normally laid-back style, Salticid was a reliable veteran when push came to shove. Instead of being surprised or asking questions, she simply jumped up next to Mihaya with a "Roger!"

Mihaya crouched down, holding the slender waist of the jumping-spider avatar with her right arm. Her thighs, already rather large for an F-type, swelled up further and stored power. Reading the direction of the wind, she waited for the perfect moment to leap diagonally up into the sky.

No matter how great Blood Leopard's raw jumping power, she still couldn't make it two kilometers in a single leap. And jumping from a tree two hundred meters off the ground meant she would take serious altitude crash damage when landed. That kind of impact spelled instant death.

But Mihaya didn't hesitate. Leopard and Salticid, flying with intense force from the branch of the massive tree, became a bullet and charged through the empty sky. The destination was not the central base in the east, but the western side of the stage—where there was nothing.

Mihaya had spun around before jumping. If there had been a Gallery, they would have assumed she was fleeing.

But of course, she would never run away. Her jump finally reached the peak of its parabola, and they entered a downward trajectory. If they kept going, they would crash and die in a few seconds, but halfway down, they started to return to the massive tree, pulled back by the thin, transparent cable Salticid held in her right hand. The end of the cable was attached to the large branch they'd been sitting on. Using that as a fulcrum, they were swinging through the air like a pendulum.

The cable was, of course, Salticid's power—the ability Dragline. In other words, a spider's silk. Likewise, a real jumping spider did not make a web, but affixed “bookmark threads” here and there while in motion to avoid falling.

“Yeeaaaah!” Crying out cheerfully, Salticid stretched out the thread little by little. At a speed essentially the same as free fall, the two glided through the sky. In the blink of an eye, they passed the dead point of the pendulum's movement and rolled upward. Timed just right to obtain the ideal angle, Salticid cut the thread.

The two flew upward at an angle once more. This time they headed toward the grassland that was Kanpachi Street, and Mihaya could see the central base. Their four allies would make it out of the forest in another minute or less. They'd been instructed to occupy the base once they reached Kanpachi, and Beryllium was no doubt waiting for the moment they appeared in the grasslands. Probably not from the sides or behind, but...

“Ah! Pard! There!” Salticid cried, loud enough so as not to be drowned out by the wind.

Following the direction in which she pointed, Mihaya could see a glint of reflected light deep in the eastern part of the stage wedging in Kanpachi Street. Not at the bottom of the woods, but the top. It was moving at high speed through the air, just like Mihaya and Salticid.

Mihaya's eyes weren't sharp enough to make out the identity of the light source, but she had no doubt it was Beryllium Coil and Chili Powder. The source of the power to move them through the air was not flight—there was only one avatar in the Accelerated World for whom that was possible—but the elastic energy of metal. In other words, a long jump using the reaction force of a spring.

“I'm transforming and running. Hang on,” Mihaya said.

“Roger!” Salticid responded.

Their pendulum jump had already passed its apex, and they were on the downward trajectory. With one jump, they'd actually moved nearly seven hundred meters, but there was still over a kilometer left until the belt of grassland in the center. They had to somehow make it there before Beryllium's team attacked their comrades from the sky above.

Staring into the dense forest closing in below her eyes, Mihaya called the technique name: Shape Change.

Instantly, Blood Leopard was enveloped in a red light. A heat came to her, as though the inside of her body was in flames. First, her limbs transformed into those of a beast, and then claws stretched out from their ends as they grew sturdier. Her torso grew slender and long, and her head shifted to join her neck at a different angle.

When the instantaneous transformation was complete, Mihaya was no longer an F-type avatar, but a leopard. Salticid straddled her back, and they plunged through a gap between the trees.

The ground drew closer with each breath. Although it wasn't a direct fall downward, if they hit the ground at this speed, they normally wouldn't have been able to avoid serious damage. But the instant the paws that Mihaya stretched out touched the ground, she shifted into a full-power dash and took no damage.

This was an ability activated only when she was in beast mode, Fall Protection.

"Awwrrright! Let's—" Salticid cut herself off mid-shout. Pushed back by the wind pressure, she hurried to sit back down and wrap her arms around Mihaya's neck.

I told you to hang on, she thought.

Mihaya pushed herself to go even faster. The massive mossy trees whistled by them, and the ground flowed beneath them, a mixture of green and brown. But this still wasn't enough. From what she'd seen while they were in the air, Beryllium Coil would arrive at the center on his springs in another twenty seconds. In other words, unless Mihaya burned through a thousand meters in less than that time, they would be too late. Doing the calculations, that was a speed of 180 kilometers per hour.

Her late father had ridden a bright-red Italian electric motorcycle. For the last four years, it had sat in the garage where he was a regular customer. It had been a mere two months earlier that Mihaya rode it for the first time. In the Road Traffic Act revision of a dozen or so years earlier, riders were allowed to get their licenses in April of the year they turned sixteen, so she'd started riding to school when she graduated from junior high.

Motorcycles equipped with two in-wheel motors with an output of 60 kilowatts reached a maximum speed of 240 kilometers per hour on paper. At present, Mihaya had only experienced the eighty kilometers per hour that was the speed limit on the main roads, but even that had made her heart rise up into her mouth at first.

Although this was the VR space of the duel stage, running at high speeds would incur serious damage and intense pain if she was to crash into something, but this brought about a mix of excitement and

fear in her. Even Salticid, who had been so cheerful during their swing jump, was now pressing herself firmly against Mihaya's back, a little more focused than before.

But Mihaya gritted her fangs and mustered up every bit of strength she had to push off the ground. Their subjective speed approached one hundred kilometers per hour in an instant, and her virtual heart beat with incredible force. The continuous pounding echoed through her body like a single-cylinder gasoline engine from a previous era.

A chill crept into her heart. The mental trauma that had produced Mihaya's duel avatar Blood Leopard was her fear and hatred of the disease that had stolen her father. In other words, a fear of the engine that kept the body going: the heart, as well as its fuel: blood. The vague anticipation that her own heart, too, might one day use up its allotted number of beats and stop.

Break free!! Mihaya willed herself. If she was going to stagnate in the depths of terror, then better to throw herself into the fierce flow.

Forward. Even just one more step *forward*.

The moment her speed surpassed one hundred kilometers per hour, another heartbeat started in the right side of her chest. The two pulses resonated and changed into a slick roar reminiscent of an electric motorcycle. Her blood raced through her body hot like flames, sending an intense power circulating through her four limbs.

Krrr! In the center of a concentric shock wave, Mihaya accelerated once more. Transformed into a bloodred bullet, she charged into the depths of the forest. In an instant, her speed reached two hundred kilometers per hour, and the massive trees that appeared before her flew backward in the same instant.

In the top of her field of view, her special-attack gauge started to drop. First Blood, the ability that allowed her to surpass her limits and run at this high speed, had been activated. Mihaya didn't know of any other duel avatars who could produce speed greater than this under their own power, without using an Enhanced Armament.

She broke through the kilometer separating them from Kanpachi Street in nineteen seconds and flew from the forest into the belt of grassland to find the backs of the allied main force directly before her. They were clumped together, running toward the large metal ring ahead in order to occupy the stronghold.

"Scatter!!" She had no sooner barked this at her team than Mihaya was jumping upward diagonally. She flew over her allies and glared at the sky.

There: a bluish-silver metal color flying some dozen meters off the ground, Beryllium Coil, and an orange-red avatar in his arms, Chili Powder. Chili was holding a large sphere in each of his outstretched

hands.

Chili let go, and the two spheres, the same color as the avatar, fell soundlessly. Their trajectory would definitely catch the main Prominence force just as they were finally starting to scatter.



“Cid!” Mihaya shouted.

“Gotcha!” Salticid stretched out her right hand, and the thread that was launched from her palm caught one of the falling spheres. She pulled back on the thread immediately, swinging the sphere around, and tossed it into the forest ahead.

But there was nothing they could do about the other sphere. Salticid couldn’t launch her thread successively, and the sphere was out of reach of Mihaya’s claws and fangs. Praying her allies would dodge, they passed them in midair.

Just as they landed very close to the stronghold and whirled around, the red sphere hit the ground.

An explosion...did not happen. Instead, a vile red smoke shot out and blanketed a corner of the grassland.

Chili Powder’s special attack, Red-Hot Grenade.

He threw a grenade containing a powder that was so spicy, it was almost lethal, to block the vision and conversation of any avatars caught up in the smoke while at the same time dealing damage.

With the debuff effect, it was more terrible than a simple explosion attack, but it was still only a grenade, so the physical range was short. But the effect range was large, so unless the person who threw it immediately retreated as fast as he could, he would get caught up in it, too. And Chili Powder’s defensive powers were on the low side, so he had to approach the enemy with a guardian and then run away once the grenade was thrown. But if he could drop in a surprise attack bomb from above, then he could escape that restriction. They might have been the energy, but she couldn’t help admiring the strategy. But this way of fighting...

No! Focus! She quickly collected her thoughts as they threatened to wander off the battlefield and gave instructions. “Cid, check the enemy force coming up from behind!”

“Roger!” Salticid had no sooner leapt off her back than Mihaya was dashing again. Her aim was Beryllium Coil’s landing point. On the left ahead of her, her four allies leapt out of the red smoke that the wind was finally starting to clear away. All their health gauges were down just under 10 percent, but because they’d spread out right before the grenade landed, they’d managed to avoid a direct hit.

“Rob! Cimon! Occupy the base! Mos, Akon, join up with Cid and take on their main force!” Mihaya instructed as she ran. She charged into the smoke without hesitation, eyes closing just before she did so in order to prevent the vision debuff. Her health gauge dropped a little because of the fine particles that stuck to her body, but she ignored this together with the tingling heat.

She broke through the smoke soon enough and opened her eyes as

she charged into the forest once more. Looking around, she caught the reflection of silver just beyond the treetops.

To land from that height, it would take focus no matter what the mitigating effect of the springs. She knew in an instant: She would aim for that opening.

Making full use of her instincts as a leopard, a prime hunter of the forest, Mihaya ran lithely, lethally.

Krsh! The branches above cracked.

Coming down with his back toward the ground was without a doubt the head of the Legion Helix, Beryllium Coil. While Chili Powder had dangled down in front of him before, the avatar was now under his right arm, likely so he could secure a decent field of view.

Mihaya raced one, then two large steps, and on the third, she jumped.

The instant her maw was as far open as she could bring it, the back covered in bluish-gray armor stiffened, perhaps sensing something. But he didn't have time to turn around. Mihaya bit into not Beryllium but rather Chili Powder's right leg and ripped him from the other avatar's arms before breaking away toward the front.

"Ouch! What, what, what?!" Chili shouted.

She released his leg in midair, only to sink her fangs deep into his neck. His shout changed to a shriek, but of course she didn't care. Her sharp fangs ripped through the orange-red armor, down to the avatar's inner body, and Mihaya's health gauge started to recover from the earlier smoke damage. It was the effect of her ability, Vital Bite.

They landed with Chili gushing a bright-red damage effect like fresh blood, and she whirled around. About ten meters away, Beryllium was sticking his own landing.

As she'd expected, he looked a little different from the last time they'd fought. Large springs had been added inside the shins of both legs. These contracted all the way to absorb the impact of landing, and he bounced up just a little from the reaction before coming down to the ground. Just like the suspension of a car or motorcycle, he appeared to also have a shock absorber to control the spring return.

"Help! Leader, heeeeeeeelllp!!" Chili Powder shouted and flailed his arms and legs, his neck firmly in Mihaya's mouth.

Beryllium started to react but then quickly checked himself. He'd probably seen Mihaya relax her bite so as not to strike the final blow. If she fought Beryllium with Vital Bite still active, her health gauge would continue to recover, so she'd have an advantage to compensate for the fact that she wouldn't be able to use her fangs, but apparently, the star of the brains team was not taken in.

"Sorry, Chili. Forgive me. I'll avenge you," Beryllium said, readying his hands into fists.

Chili Powder swallowed a shriek as if accepting his fate. “You better! The rest is up to you, Leader!”

After being witness to this exchange, she couldn’t exactly dangle him like a kitten from her mouth forever. Mihaya bit down and crushed Chili’s neck, and his health gauge dropped to zero. Enveloped in the vanishing effect of his avatar, she shot a glance at Beryllium Coil.

Near the stronghold a little ways off, her comrades should have been engaged in battle with the main force of the Helix team. Although it was five against four, Brain Burst was the kind of game where things never went according to those sorts of calculations. She had to defeat Beryllium as soon as possible and race to the center, but there was just one thing she really wanted to know before they fought.

“That strategy back there. You come up with that?” she asked in a low voice.

Beryllium shrugged, but then, his inverted triangle goggles shook from left to right. “Sorry, no. I just heard about this player who did huge damage with a strategy like that back in the day. Long-distance, wide-range attack from above. Most powerful combo when you think about it. I was thinking we could take the victory in one blow if we used it, but...” Here, he closed his mouth and nodded as if he’d realized something. “I get it. You told your comrades to dodge back there ’cause you know whoever came up with that strategy?”

“I do.” Mihaya nodded gently. “We’ve fought a bunch of times.”

Normally, when the parent Burst Linker belongs to a Legion, the child generally becomes a member of the same Legion.

But that was difficult in Mihaya’s case. At the point when she became a Burst Linker four years earlier, her parent, Akira Himi—Aqua Current—belonged to the Black Legion, Nega Nebulus, and their headquarters at the time were not in Suginami but Shibuya. This was pretty far from Mihaya’s home in Nerima, which meant she wouldn’t gain the greatest advantage of being in a Legion, the right to refuse challenges within Legion territory.

Mihaya wasn’t sure what to do, but Akira had had a ready suggestion. “You can just join the Red Legion that occupies Nerima.”

But then, wouldn’t Mihaya and Akira have to fight at some point in the future?

Her cousin in red-framed glasses had nodded simply, as if wondering what the issue was.

“We’ll just fight with everything we have, then. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

So following the advice of the younger Akira, Mihaya had joined

Red Rider's Legion, Prominence. Although to be more precise, they had actually scouted her when she was still unaffiliated with any Legion and learning how to fight.

Four years ago, the mutual nonaggression pact did not yet exist among the major Legions, so Akira's Nega Nebulus and Mihaya's Prominence were actively fighting territory battles for the right to control the Suginami area between Shibuya and Nerima.

One day after Mihaya had reached level four through steady work, she was finally instructed to take part in the Territories. She attacked Suginami Area No. 2 as one member of an eight-person team, but Aqua Current was not on the enemy team.

An emotion had flickered through her heart, though regret or relief, she couldn't tell. But then, ordered to defend the base to the rear, Mihaya had suddenly looked up at the sky of the field and saw it: a sky-blue duel avatar ripping through the black clouds of the Purgatory stage.

The speed was incredible. Three times Mihaya's maximum running speed at the time of one hundred kilometers per hour—no, four times that. In the blink of an eye, the avatar had moved from a corner of the sky to directly above the base, holding a small, light-red avatar. This avatar had drawn the large bow in her hands and launched a single flaming arrow.

Or so Mihaya had thought, until it split into countless pieces that poured down on the heads of the four members of the Promi team.

Desperately weaving through the fierce attack, essentially a rain of flames, Mihaya had chased after the sky-blue avatar shooting off to the north. Part of her mind had been vaguely occupied with not allowing another attack like that, but to be honest, she had simply chased after the blue comet as if she was in a dream.

Fortunately, the avatar had been flying along the broad Kannana Street, so she managed to keep up somehow, running at full power in Beast Mode. The propulsive flames of the large booster equipped on the avatar's back weakened, and the two members of Nega Nebulus landed on the roof of a building alongside the road. Mihaya ran up the pedestrian bridge, leapt into a nearby building, and continued to jump and jump until she reached the same altitude as the enemies.

Quickly noticing Mihaya's approach, the light-red, long-distance avatar had immediately hid behind her comrade.

At her first glance of the sky-blue avatar turning around lightly, Mihaya had felt something pierce her heart. Despite the long hair swaying and shining like liquid metal, the graceful lines of the F-type body—an elegant form in extreme contrast with Blood Leopard's—she had strongly felt that this avatar represented a craving very much like her own.

Recovering from her momentary distraction, she had lowered her leopard body and took on a battle posture, while the sky-blue avatar smiled brightly at her.

“What wonderful speed. And your form is also very beautiful. What’s your name?”

“Blood Leopard,” Mihaya had replied briefly.

“I’ll remember it,” the blue avatar had said. “I’m Sky Raker. And this is Ardor Maiden.”

This had been her first meeting with Sky Raker, the Submaster of Nega Nebulus, already the fearsome ICBM, and Ardor Maiden, aka Testarossa, who was getting serious results paired up with Raker despite essentially being a newbie.

And then Mihaya had fought Raker and was promptly dispatched with a dance of three successive palm strikes before she had a chance to strike a real blow.

It had been four years since then. Sky Raker, Mihaya’s fated rival, had disappeared from the Accelerated World two and a half years earlier and then returned two months ago as a member of the new Nega Nebulus.

And Nega Nebulus wasn’t the only one welcoming a new generation, but Prominence, too. Since the two Legions had concluded an indefinite truce, she hadn’t gotten the chance to directly duel Sky Raker again. But Mihaya felt like the time was coming soon. When they cleared away the dark clouds covering the Accelerated World, and Aqua Current also returned from semiretirement the way Sky Raker had, she would have her parent and her most worthy opponent see everything she had become, the sharpness of her honed fangs, the quickness of her refined body.

She never dreamed she would see another Burst Linker copy that strategy before she could finally fight Raker. She struggled for half a second between whether to praise Beryllium Coil’s passion for research or be angry at his nerve in copying his predecessors.

“Unfortunately, the original was about three times as painful and five times as fast,” she said finally, careful to keep her expression entirely neutral.

“Well, I guess so.” The slender metal color nodded evenly and nonchalantly raised his arms. “But we’ve got only one level between us now. I’m definitely going to win one-on-one today. We’re both making our comrades wait. How about we get started?”

“K.” Mihaya sank her body down.

The biggest characteristic of the Primeval Forest stage was the large creatures, as powerful as the Enemies of the Unlimited Neutral

Field, who lived there and would attack if provoked, but she had already confirmed during their scouting mission that there weren't any within a kilometer of the central base. There weren't any other annoying obstacle effects, so from here, victory would be decided by a simple contest of their abilities.

She didn't like to idly glare at her opponent before the fight. She started to leap forward when she noticed that Beryllium Coil looked a little shorter than he had when she'd first faced off against him. The reason was because the springs equipped in his legs were compressed at that moment, making just the faintest of sounds.

She forcefully twisted her leaping body to the right and changed the trajectory of her jump. At exactly the same time, Beryllium's legs screeched, and the bluish-gray avatar charged with essentially no warning, using the reactive force of his springs instead of the usual steps involved in a leap.

"Heeah!" His left arm shot forward from its compact ready position.

If she took a striking counter from the fist of a metal color, Mihaya would take some serious damage, even with her defensive powers, fairly high for a red type.

But in Beast Mode, Blood Leopard had a height of less than a meter, making hitting her with a punch a Herculean effort. Beryllium lowered his trajectory with the flavor of an uppercut, but Mihaya had already slid down beneath it to avoid it.

Skeek! The air shook once more, and a silver light flashed in Mihaya's field of view.

The large knives in Beryllium's arms sprang out in an instant. This was the spring-loaded Jackknife Guillotine.

Naturally, she had not forgotten about the existence of this ability. But she hadn't expected that the attack also went from stored to rotating 180 degrees. In the middle of the rotation, the forty-centimeter blade stood up directly from his arm, albeit for a mere instant. Beryllium magnificently matched that instant with Mihaya's evasive action.

Cool, Mihaya murmured to herself, twisting her head farther to the right. If she'd been in normal mode—i.e., human form—she would have had no way to evade or defend against the knife blade and would have taken serious damage to her face. Even if she wouldn't have died instantly, she might have lost an eye lens and had her field of view cut in half.

But transformed as she was in Beast Mode, Mihaya had an even more powerful weapon in the claws of her four limbs. And in the head the knife was aiming for. Four hard, sharp fangs.

Of course, if the timing had been even a millisecond later or

faster, her counterattack would have failed, and she would have taken real damage. But Mihaya already knew that running alone wasn't just about speed. There was also the "battle of speed" that existed only in the world of the instantaneous.

Two months earlier, when she'd only just started high school, Mihaya had ended up fighting in a tag team with an unexpected Burst Linker. The place was Akihabara Battle Ground, the duelist holy ground in the Akihabara area. The enemy was Rust Jigsaw, who had the ability to ignore the rules and isolate himself from the matching list. And her partner was a member of the new Nega Nebulus and the only avatar in the Accelerated World with the ability of true flight, Silver Crow.

At first, she got the impression that she couldn't really count on him, but when it came down to the actual battle, Crow showed duel instincts that made it hard to believe he'd become a Burst Linker only six months earlier.

The enemy Rust Jigsaw had the annoying long-distance technique of launching jigsaw rings rotating at high speed, and Mihaya had no way of defending against these. Right before Jigsaw leapt out, the rotating saws were thrown at a timing that was impossible to avoid, and Mihaya had instructed Crow, on her back, to take care of them. To be honest, she would've thought he'd done a great job if he'd sacrificed an arm defending against them.

But Crow had realized that there were no teeth on the inside of the rings and caught the rotating saws flying in at super-high speeds with his fingers, like some kind of miraculous ring toss, to stop them totally uninjured. If his timing had been off by even a second, his fingers or neck or even both arms would have been knocked flying.

Silver Crow, three years her junior, had taught her then and there that the fight wasn't only a competition of avatar action, but also of the speed of perception.

Ever since, when she was dueling, she always practiced honing the acceleration of her senses—her powers of insight. It was a mysterious thing, but the sharper her instantaneous perception was, the more her struggle and hesitation when decorating cakes in the real world disappeared. Her aunt praising her work on the strawberry labyrinth was definitely because of this work.

Now was the perfect time to leverage the way of fighting in the Accelerated World that a hard-working player two years her junior had taught her.

The moment she felt the knife approach with a sense that was neither

vision nor hearing, Mihaya bit down, her mouth opening the bare minimum.

Skreeeeench! Pieces of the blade scattered glittering to either side of her face. Her powerful and sharp leopard fangs unerringly caught the side of the knife and shattered it.

“Nngh!” A grunt of surprise slipped from Beryllium Coil. He swung out with a left uppercut, and the instant his balance tipped slightly, Mihaya lashed out her long tail. The tip caught Beryllium’s left leg and further knocked him off-balance.

They slipped past each other, and no sooner had she landed than she was leaping forward. Using the trunk of the tree directly in front of her as a foothold, she somersaulted backward.

In her upside-down field of view, she saw the crumpling Beryllium. The springs of both legs were contracting once more; he was likely intending to close the distance with another Spring Dash. But she was not about to let him.

Rawr! A wild howl ripping from her throat, Mihaya pressed her front paws against Beryllium’s back and bit deeply into his defenseless neck. Her fangs sent sparks flying as they dug into the metal armor and pierced the avatar’s body inside.

“When—? Y-you—!” Beryllium deployed the jackknife of his right hand and tried to attack Mihaya behind him. But before he could, she shook the duel avatar in her mouth as hard as she could. Her fangs dug in ever deeper, and the knife was knocked off course.

An avatar that was more close-range than mid-range had essentially no way of escaping when Blood Leopard was biting into his neck from behind—just like prey being taken down by a wild leopard.

With Beryllium Coil hanging from her mouth, Mihaya started to run east.

“Dammit! I’m not some kitten here!” the leader of Helix grumbled, flailing his legs and arms, but he couldn’t do anything more than scraping damage. And the gauge he worked so hard to take from Mihaya was recovered instantly through the effect of her Vital Bite.

Meanwhile, with her four fangs digging into his vital spots, Beryllium’s health gauge was dropping before her eyes. It hit zero as they flew out of the forest into the grasslands.

“Just you wait. Next time...” Unable to finish this speech, Beryllium Coil broke into countless fragments and disappeared.

“Next time, bring a new trick. GG,” Mihaya muttered after him.

And then she remembered it was a little too soon to be saying *good game*. Ahead of her, the five members of Prominence and the four members of Helix were still engaged in a fierce fight around the stronghold. Chili Powder and now their leader Beryllium had been dispatched, and they were pressed down in terms of what was left in

their gauges as well, but the enemy appeared to have no intention of throwing in the towel yet. In which case, she would meet them with everything she had.

Mihaya howled once to encourage her comrades before starting off across the grassland at top speed.

All the Territory Battles for the fifth week of June were finished, and Mihaya slowly let out the air that had built up in her chest as she returned to the specialized room in the back of Patisserie La Plage.

During the accelerated duel, she had, of course, continued to breathe with her real-world body. If she fought the whole time in the Territories, 1.8 seconds passed in the real world, so the lungs that exhaled with the Burst Link command would be taking in their next breath around the time she woke up.

Back when she was a newbie, she would often try to take a deep breath immediately after she returned to the real world before exhaling the last one and end up coughing. Her parent, Akira, rolled her eyes and said it was because she kept running all over the place during the duel, but that was a long time ago now, too.

She hadn't dueled or fought alongside Akira in almost three years. A lot of things had changed after the destruction of the former Nega Nebulus headquartered in Shibuya—no, the night before that, when the Red King had been pushed to total point loss by the Black Lotus.

Prominence fell into total chaos, faced with the abnormally abrupt departure of their Legion Master, who had earned their absolute faith as one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color. Although system-wise, the master privileges were automatically ceded to the Submaster at the time, half the members refused to accept him as the new leader of the Legion.

They came up on their next Territories with nothing settled, and Prominence was utterly crushed. Even though the Legions of the other kings did not attack them, they lost to one after another of the mid- and small-size Legions, opponents who were superior in number and average in level. In a single night, their territory was halved, and more than a few members put in their resignations. The indignant new master went so far as to use the Judgment Blow on one of those leaving, and Prominence's split became decisive.

Mihaya emptily watched the destructive drama of the Legion she had belonged to for a little over a year from almost the outside. Regardless of the fact that she'd barely spoken to Red Rider, she'd

trusted him as a strong and fair master, and she'd had absolutely no complaints about fighting under him, but she felt nothing like the adoration of the veteran members.

So she coolly accepted his departure as the result of having lost a fight. And even if he was dead as a Burst Linker, that naturally didn't mean his life in the real world had also been taken. It wasn't as though he could never ride a motorcycle again or drink his favorite coffee, like Mihaya's father.

Mihaya thought this way of thinking probably meant she was heartless. She stayed a member of Prominence, but she never really liked the new master, and she even felt like she might retire, too, if things stayed the same.

What changed this was when she saw a newbie Linker trying desperately to protect herself and a few comrades in the Nerima area, which had fallen into its own Warring States period. Her level was still quite low, and her fighting style was the very definition of rough, but her spirit alone was so hot that it threatened to burn the entire stage to the ground. *This kid'll definitely get stronger if she survives the chaos.* Mihaya applied to join the girl's team, in a move that she herself found strange.

Her instincts had been right, but at the time, she never dreamed that not only would this small girl's avatar become so strong that she would charge through the wall of level eight in only a year, but she would eventually take the throne as the second Red King.

"What're you looking at me and grinnin' for, Pard?" The redheaded girl sitting across from her—the Second Red King, Scarlet Rain, aka Yuniko Kozuki—pursed her lips tightly together in a frown.

Mihaya quickly shook her head. "I wasn't looking at you and grinning."

"Huh? So then, a smile of satisfaction at beating Helix?"

"Not that, either."

"Then what? ...You don't have to say if you don't want to, though." Niko leaned back on the sofa, a childish—and indeed, she was still in sixth grade—pout on her face.

Mihaya thought a moment before answering. "I was just remembering all this stuff during the duel. From way back."

"Hmm." Niko cocked her head to one side but then nodded quickly and smiled herself. "You were, huh? Nice to have memories that can make ya smile."

"....."

Mihaya shifted her gaze unconsciously in a questioning manner. As if he could read her thoughts, Niko's smile became pained.

"Don't look at me like that. I got memories like that, too, y'know."

Like maybe what you said to me the first time you ever talked to me.”

“Just forget that.”

“No way! Saving it forever!” Niko laughed out loud before composing herself in a Legion Master way. “Anyway, nice work defending again this week. How was the fight with Helix?”

“The leader and the members are gradually getting stronger. And they’re keen students.”

“They are, huh? It’s ’cause we were all a mess with the whole ISS kit thing. We let our guard down even a bit next week, and it could be dangerous. And we had fewer people taking part today, too.”

“About that.” Mihaya got a serious look and stared hard at Niko. “A small issue with the members who backed out at the last minute.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“It wasn’t all of them—probably three. They ignored orders and attacked another Legion.”

“Who?” Instantly, Niko’s brow was furrowed. “And where?”

“Blaze Heart and two others. The location...Suginami. Nega Nebulus.”

“Whaaaat?!” Leaping to her feet, Niko bashed her shins on the edge of the table. “Ow!” The cry slipped out as she fell back onto the sofa. Even as tears sprang up in the corners of her eyes, her fierce expression remained unchanged. “That’s a violation of the truce! Why the...? So ohhh, I get it...That thing yesterday...”

Mihaya nodded. “I think they probably went to confirm with the Black King directly. Blaze has been a member since your predecessor’s Prominence.”

“Unnnh, I get how they feel, but, like, whoever butted in yesterday in the Unlimited Neutral Field was probably—nah, like an 80 percent chance that was a fake Lotus. That’s why I said to wait until we could get some info.”

“They’ve attacked, though, so that’s that. They were probably—no, an eighty percent chance they were repelled.”

“Ninety percent. Although, like, if they beat a team with Black One on it, I’d actually wanna high-five ’em.”

She smiled wryly at her leader’s nonchalance before clearing her throat and returning to the subject at hand. “Win or lose, we need to follow up on the treaty violation. I’m going to go to Suginami now and apologize directly to the Black Ki—”

“Mm. Mmmm. Hang on a sec.” Niko snapped her hand up to cut Mihaya off and turned her gaze to the ceiling for a second before grinning. It was her “great idea” face. “I’ll go do that.”

“.....”

“Listen. This is the kinda thing that’s got more weight if the leader herself goes out there.”

“.....”

“And we’re supposed to go along for their school festival tomorrow, yeah? Gonna be there anyway, so!”

“...We’re going to be there tomorrow, so you’ll take care of it today?” Mihaya asked, eyes turned up slightly.

The Red King cackled. “I’ll stay over at his place tonight, so come get me in the morning. I’ll make sure to get your ticket for the festival, too!”

“...Thanks.”

Although Niko was generally on the serious side, today was not the first time she had gotten overly active when it came to Nega Nebulus. Mihaya swallowed all kinds of things down and nodded, and Niko jumped off the sofa and picked up her backpack from the floor, no doubt intending to head over to Suginami right away.

“You can leave your bag here and just come get it tomorrow on our way home.”

“Oh, thanks. Then I will do just that.” She set the bag on the sofa and trotted to the door. She put her hand on the knob, but rather than open it right away, she looked back—and the young king had a smile on her face that was equal parts innocent and adult.

“Pard, I’m looking forward to the labyrinth next week.”

“K.”

She nodded at Mihaya’s reply, still smiling, and then waved before opening the door and stepping out.

After waiting until the sound of her footsteps disappeared, Mihaya also stood up. Four years since she’d become a Burst Linker. Three years since she’d found a master she could truly serve.

She had fought too many duels to count, leveled up, and could now run so fast that her old self didn’t begin to compare, but Mihaya still wasn’t satisfied with her speed. It was getting to be time for her to break free from running to escape fear. To go to the next stage. To become faster than she was now. And to protect the people she loved, the things she loved.

She raised her right hand and made a loose fist. She could feel the movement of her blood in her fingertips. *Ba-dmp. Ba-dmp.* The pulse, once a second. The direct cause of her father’s death was a sudden palpitation of the ventricle caused by cardiomyopathy. His pulse was over two hundred beats per minute, and then his heart stopped as if burned up, never to move again.

It was faint, but there was also a genetic element in idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy. So it was possible that Mihaya would someday be afflicted with the same disease, causing an anomaly in her heart. But her avatar, Blood Leopard, had taught her that she could never go anywhere if all she did was live in fear of that.

Burn her blood. Make her body race like a maelstrom. She would look only at herself and keep running. Just like a leopard racing smoothly through the grass.

Mihaya picked up Niko's backpack and, holding it tightly, left the strategy room.

(End)

AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 18: The Black Dual Swordsman*.

First of all, I apologize for once again making you wait eight months since the last volume. I'm going to do my best to deliver the next volume to you at my previous pace, so please forgive me!

Now, then. In Volume 18, the last of the Four Elements, Graphite Edge, finally makes an appearance, and the executives of the first Nega Nebulus are together. Although Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and the others don't appear to be too moved at their reunion...(LOL). With his demeanor, his position, the names of his special attacks, and so much more, Graph is quirky in all kinds of ways, but he's a valuable (?) male character, so please do cheer him on!

This is changing the subject, but as a general rule, up to now, *Accel World* has been written from the limited third-person perspective of the protagonist Haruyuki. But with that single viewpoint, there comes the fact that I can only write the things that Haruyuki saw or heard, and when the number of complex scenes with simultaneous development in different places increases together with the increase in the number of characters, the story just doesn't come together with Haruyuki's viewpoint alone, and so the perspectives of other characters have been added since around Volume 15. We've had scenes from the point of view of Kuroyukihime, Pard, Magenta Scissor, aka Rui Odagiri, and in this volume, scenes from the perspective of Utai Shinomiya and Chocolat Puppeter, aka Shihoko Nago.

The number of things I can write about has increased—or rather, the number of things I *have* to write about has increased, so in order to progress with the story, I'd prefer not to add too many characters' perspectives. But on the other hand, it is quite a bit of fun to write these new perspectives. In particular, the scene with Shihoko and the members of Petit Paquet was quite novel for me, with its tone like a slice-of-life comedy novel, which I've never done before (LOL). If I can find the opportunity, I'd like to do their part again, a little longer next

time.

The story is at last (or perhaps I should say finally...) moving toward the conclusion of the two pillars of the tale that are the Castle and the Acceleration Research Society. I intend to do my best to retrieve the countless bits of foreshadowing I've sown aimlessly up to now, so I do hope you will all join me for the ride!

Additionally, as in the previous volume, this volume collects a previously unpublished story that was a perk for the TV anime *Accel World* Blu-Ray and DVD release, "Prominence Trajectory." I would like to once again thank those involved who allowed me to print it here, as well as everyone who watched the anime version.

Thank you also to illustrator HIMA, who drew so cutely the three members of Petit Paquet and the Coba-Manga sisters who appeared here in the real for the first time, and my editor, Miki, who took the greatest of pains in arranging for this and that and doing traffic control! We will meet again in Volume 19!

Reki Kawahara
On a certain day in April 2015

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